

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA  
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CORN SILK DOLLS

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

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MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH  
WITH CREATIVE WRITING EMPHASIS

By

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Midwest City, Oklahoma

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CORN SILK DOLLS

A THESIS

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

December 14, 2007

By John Sawchuk, Ph.D.  
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For my family

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

University of Central Oklahoma

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NAME: SHAREN FAY VICK

TITLE OF THESIS: CORN SILK DOLLS

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: DR. J. DAVID MACEY, JR.

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ABSTRACT:

If there is any truth in this work of fiction, it is found in its origin and genesis. When I was a little girl, my father was a pipe-fitter welder for the 798 local union of Tulsa, Oklahoma. In that position, he was hired out during the good weather months of the year. Every summer when school was out, my mother, sister and I joined dad wherever he was. We spent all our summers together and always had a lot of fun. My father worked many long hard hours and came home dirty and tired, yet he always had a smile on his face. He was always glad to see us and, as often as possible, he went out of his way to take us to see the local sights or to the movies. These summers were wonderful fun and different every year. We stayed in apartments or rented houses. One summer, in particular, we stayed in a farmhouse in Douglas, Nebraska. I was fifteen that year and remember it well.



The farmhouse in this novel is similar to that one. The farm is similar to the farm owned by the Lopp family in Spencer, Oklahoma. Some of the scenes developed from actual events. That's where the truth ends. The family is different from mine. I don't have an older brother or a younger sister. My parents never argued. The people in this novel do not resemble anyone I know and are purely figments of my imagination, much like the dolls. I simply picked out a farm I liked, a house from my childhood, and placed them together. All the furnishings, dolls and individuals came from someplace in the deep, dark recesses of my mind. I placed them on the page because I thought it would be fun. I thoroughly enjoyed creating these characters and a number of others that didn't make it to the final draft.

To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

## Chapter 1

Angela dreaded this summer trip. Like all summers, something would go wrong, terribly wrong. ‘The Harrison Family Curse’ would not go away. It was the same every summer. Dad always took a construction job out of town for a few weeks someplace where the kids didn’t want to go.

No matter what happened, it would mark them. Their lives would never be the same. When they returned home, they couldn’t be unscathed. Their friends would know it. Their relatives expected it. Even their dog Corky could tell that they had been changed, permanently change.

What would happen this time? No one knew. Angela only hoped that this time it would be a good experience, unlike last year and the year before.

Angela raced about preparing for the big summer trip, packing all her necessary items. As the Harrisons’ oldest daughter, she had packed all her favorite

things carefully: her books (she intended to read voraciously all summer); her colorful new summer clothes (she loved lime green and orange); her music, in case a piano was available; and Lysol spray, to keep things fresh.

During the school year, they landed at their home in the suburbs of Dallas, but the Harrisons were like gypsies on the move in the summer. This summer they would be staying in the outskirts of Gainesville, Texas, a town where dad used to work on the police force. He had a few friends there and was looking forward to this fun-filled summer of adventure. He promised them a summer they'd never forget, a summer from the past that would change the shape of the future.

He couldn't wait to get there, and neither could mom. They really liked the outdoors and good clean summer fun in a small town, any small town. But since this one held memories for dad, they were more excited about it than usual.

As they hurried toward their destination, Lynette, Angela's little sister, the spoiled, innocent terror, was twitching in her seat sucking on a lollypop. "Want some?" she asked as she shoved the sticky mess in Angela's direction.

"Uh, barf, disgusting," Angela said. "Just because you stay covered in syrupy goo is no reason for me to be drenched in it."

Lynette continued to drip goo on herself as if she were about to be pasted on a postcard. Angela would have liked to send her back to where she came from. "Hello, God, take Lynette, we've voted. It's unanimous. We're going to clean house and toss her out," she mused, but was afraid to say.

Corky, the beagle, snatched Lynette's lollypop, causing the three-year-old to scream.

Sheila fished in her purse for another lollypop to quiet Lynette, then looked at Angela with a big grin, "This is going to be an interesting summer." Sheila had often said that life was what you made it, and she expended considerable effort in creating the world that the Harrisons inhabited. Angela, though, was not enthused and was more than ready to end the journey.

Hayden stretched as he woke, nearly punching Angela in the eye.

"Ouch," she squealed and shoved his hand away before he touched her.

"The realtor said that an old guy died in this house a few months ago,"

Hayden reminded them.

Lynette tried to hand Hayden another soggy lollypop. He brushed it away with his hand and said, "Nasty."

Sheila peeked at him over her spectacles, "Shush, that doesn't mean anything. People die all the time. A house is not affected by death."

"Nasty," Lynette said with an enlightened look on her face.

As the Entourage proceeded along, Angela asked, "What about the old man we met on the way out of the real estate office?"

"Yeah," Hayden lowered his voice, mocking the man, "You're making a big mistake, renting that farmhouse. Something peculiar is happening out there in that God-forsaken place, something abnormal."

Angela turned her head toward Hayden and asked, "Why did he tell us that?"

Hayden continued to mock, "Yeah, those people that passed. That weren't no ordinary passing. It's the house. Something evil is in the house."

Angela asked, "Why did that old fossil say something like that. Was he trying to scare us away?"

Sheila shrugged her shoulders.

Angela looked at her dad and asked, "What do you think that old man was trying to tell us?"

"I don't know," James said. "He acted like a real flake. Like he thought this place was dangerous or something."

"Do you think it is?" Angela inquired.

James slowed the car as he answered. "No, I don't think that at all. This is a great place to spend the summer. The house is structurally sound. I think we were lucky to find an old country home available."

"Yeah," Hayden jetted it with his normal voice, "It's a lot better than the apartment we stayed in last summer."

"I agree," James said. "There's nothing like living on a farm. You can get in touch with nature, find some peace and have a summer to remember."

Sheila nodded in agreement as they approached the home. They could see in the distance an elegant old farmhouse—regal in its setting, yellow and pure white, stately, surely not a bad place to spend a summer. It appeared that the house had expanded in all directions over the years, just like the family. A "For Rent" sign dominated the lawn.

James parked the Entourage in the drive and turned to look at the family through sparkling brown eyes, pronouncing loudly, "The ghost of old man Bradford still roams the grounds, rambling and searching for victims he can devour."

“Shut up, James! You’ll have the girls al upset,” Sheila scolded.

Corky bounded out of the car and crossed the overgrown lawn, stopping to make his mark on the orange and purple flowers that lined the rock sidewalk leading to the house.

Hayden quickly spotted the basketball hoop in front of the house and tossed a few baskets before helping James unload the cargo.

Angela straightened her clothes, grabbed her bag, and followed her mother and Lynette up the front steps. She stood around and gazed at her dad while he unloaded the luggage, and Sheila unlocked the front door. The Harrison women entered the house.

Hayden bounded up the porch steps carrying a load of luggage. He stepped through the door next to his sister dropped the bags where he stood. When his eyes met Angela’s, they both knew the race was on. He darted up the staircase in order to grab the best room, with Angela close behind. She shoved him to one side and passed him. He shoved her back. The struggle continued till they reached the top.

“I won. I won,” Angela yelled as she jumped up and down and gloated.

Hayden wasted no time. He quickly surveyed the rooms and dived at the bed in the room with the most windows.

“You always do that.”

“Do what?”

“Take the biggest room.”

“I was the first one here.”

Angela dropped her head and strolled into one of the other rooms. She'd spent so much time gloating over getting to the top of the stairs first that she had forgotten the purpose of the race.

She took a good look around the room and said, "I like this room. It's so cool." The walls were yellow, but everything in the room was pink. Dolls poked out from every corner. They were odd little dolls. Angela picked one up to examine it. Its clothing was made out of cornhusk. This particular one had a little cape and corn silk hair, but no face. She looked at the other dolls. None of them had faces, but all of them had corn silk for hair and cornhusk clothing. She placed the doll back on the table where she found it and hurried to open the windows for some fresh air.

Sheila surveyed the upstairs, looked in on Angela, and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Rearranging things, doesn't this room look grand?"

Sheila leaned against the painted door-frame with her arms crossed in front of her, "I don't think this is the best room for you, dear."

"Geez, Mom, it's so cool," Angela insisted as she twirled around like a dancer on the stage. "It's so delicate and fresh."

"This room is next to the master bedroom," Sheila said as she cocked her head and pointed at another room, "You need to move down the hall to the end room instead. It's a more grown-up room."

"Why? I love this room."



“Come on, you’re a big girl now.” Sheila put her arm around Angela and escorted her to the other room. “See, it’s a larger room. You will have more shelves to put your books on, a large closet, a full-length mirror and a fan. It is more appropriate for a girl your age.”

“It’s smaller than Hayden’s room.”

“So’s the other one. This is a very nice room,” Sheila insisted as she left.

Dolls lurked in it as well, though not as many. Soft turquoise walls and white furnishings created a soothing effect, homey in a way. The room seemed to pull a person right in. Angela liked it better than the other one, though she would never admit it.

Last year the family had spent the summer in a small apartment. Hayden had his own room, and Angela shared her room with Lynette, who was in her terrible twos and into Angela’s everything. Angela was thrilled to have a private room this year, but wouldn’t admit it. “Hayden needs extra room to hold all his stink,” she muttered.

“Angela, that’s not fair,” Sheila called from down the hall.

“He always gets the best of everything.”

Sheila returned to the threshold of Angela’s room. “Young lady, settle down. You are making me tired.” She grimaced, “He does not get the best of everything. You know that.”

Sheila exited once again. No doubt she had to tend to more important issues, like Lynette.

Angela bounded out to the car to retrieve another bag and bumped into Hayden without offering an apology. He shoved her in return. She shoved him back. This continued as they both clamored again to be the first upstairs with their bags. Angela won this time by pushing him back as she leaped to the top. Hayden dropped his bags at the foot of his bed and darted back downstairs.

Angela carefully rearranged her room and sprayed it with Lysol. Once the work was done, she lay back on her bed.

When she looked up, she saw a spider on the ceiling and screamed, "Help! There's a horrible hairy spider in here. Help!"

Hayden came running to save her. He jumped up and down on the bed, throwing punches at it like a Kung Fu fighter. The spider fell at Angela's feet. She backed away from it as Hayden crushed it into the rug.

As much as she enjoyed being rescued from the spider, she knew her bed would never be the same. Now the rug was filled with spider juice, "Uggh," she muttered as she fanned her hand before her face. The covers on the bed lay rumpled beyond her ability to repair, and her fresh clean room was filled with the stench of smelly foot odors and underarm sweat.

"When are you going to start killing your own spiders?" Hayden inquired as he sat his sweaty body on what remained of her bed.

Angela didn't say anything but put her hands on her hips and glared at him.

"Say, 'thank you,'" he said as he turned toward the door.

On his way out, he stepped on a doll with a pin stuck in it. He tossed the doll in the corner, hobbled back to her bed, flopped down, and took his sock off.

After rubbing his foot and catching a glimpse of Angela's reaction to the event, he fanned his sock in the air.

Angela wrinkled her nose and fanned away the odor. Hayden rested the damp sock on the bed and removed the other one before walking out of the room waving them both in the air. Angela sprayed the room with Lysol again and turned on the fan to clear the air.

Alone finally, in a cleaner room, she started putting her books on the shelf. Lynette pushed the door open. There she stood in all her glory, sucker drippings, Coca-Cola and sand on her short suit, and a fresh banana in her hand. She dived directly into Angela's bed, smearing banana everywhere. "I want to stay in your room, Angela," she demanded.

"You have your own room with all those pink flowers and dolls in it." Angela took the banana away from Lynette and threw it in the trash, but not before most of it was embedded in the spread, "Why would you want to sleep in here with me?"

"I want to be with you."

"Maybe some other night, but not tonight." Angela tried to wipe the bedspread clean. "You'll get used to it. You're a big girl now. In a week, you will be four. It's time to have your own room." Angela led her sister to the bathroom to clean her up. While they were in there, Angela thought she heard something upstairs in the attic, but quickly dismissed the thought.

When the girls returned to Angela's room, she looked out on the grounds below and saw Hayden pitching baskets.

“Angela, could you come down and help me? Bring Lynette with you,” Sheila called from the bottom of the stairs.

“Ok,” Angela responded. As they left the room, Lynette spied one of Hayden’s socks that he had dropped in the hall.

“Nasty,” Lynette said, proud of her new word.

“Yeah, really nasty,” Angela agreed.

As soon as they came downstairs, James sent Angela back up to close all the windows she’d opened, but she left the one in Hayden’s room open and claimed she didn’t open it. James went out and spoke to Hayden, who immediately came inside and tromped up the staircase to close the one window he had opened.

“I heard a bumping noise in the attic while I was in the bathroom,” Angela informed her dad.

“Probably the wind. I’ll check it out later,” James said.

Sheila stepped in the doorway and slung a cleaning towel over her shoulder as she approached the front window.

“Why don’t you go dust off that old piano and see how it sounds?” she suggested to Angela. “We’re lucky to find one here.”

Angela raced in to check it out, with Lynette tagging along. Old world furniture covered in dark blue filled the room. A soft yellow throw lay across the sofa, and fresh purple and orange flowers filled a vase on the table by the window. ‘Mom must have placed those there,’ Angela thought. The black lacquered piano was much older than the one she had at home and was the prettiest that Angela had

ever seen. The ceiling fan cooled the room as Angela cleared away a layer of dust, parked herself on the bench, and sounded out the C scale.

Lynette, determined to help, crawled up on the bench next to Angela and started pressing down keys of her own. Angela pushed her little hands off of the keyboard and said, “No, no!” Lynette was not discouraged. Once again she pounded out her own little tune. Angela pushed her hands off of the keys and repeated, “No! No!” Lynette sat quietly until Angela started fingering out the scales. Lynette started banging on the keys with the doll she had in her hand. Angela shoved Lynette off the bench.

Lynette whimpered, shoved her big sister and climbed back on. Angela shoved back. The struggle continued until Lynette bent down and bit Angela’s thigh.

“Ouch, she bit me!” Angela yelled. “Mom, Lynette bit me!”

“Lynette, come in the kitchen and drink your Kool-Aid,” Mom called.

Lynette got off the stool. Sheila came in and stood at the door, looking at Angela without saying a word while Lynette was leaving. “You are too big to pick on Lynette.”

Angela dropped her mouth and glared at her mom. “I didn’t do anything.”

Sheila placed her hands on her hips and gave Angela her evil eye before she turned and walked toward the kitchen. “When you finish your practice session, dinner will be ready,” her mom said as she left.

“That’s ridiculous.” Angela mumbled. “Lynette bites me, and she doesn’t even get whacked.”

“Did you say something, Angela?”

Silence filled the air

“No.” Angela muttered to herself once she was convinced no one was listening, “If I bit someone, even if I were only two, I’d have been slapped and stood in the corner for half a day, but Lynette gets rewarded when she does something wrong.”

“Dinner’s ready,” Sheila called as James and Hayden were coming in the front door, both sweaty and covered with blades of grass.

Angela took her place at the table and helped herself to a turkey sandwich and Kool-Aid. Lynette was playing with half a sandwich. She’d already dropped the other half on the floor. When Hayden entered the room, he snatched at the tray of sandwiches and took over half of them. Angela thought her brother could win some sort of trophy for eating.

“What room do you suppose the old man died in?” Hayden asked.

Sheila shrugged, but James joined in, “Maybe he died at the piano.”

“James!” Sheila scolded.

“Or in this room, eating a sandwich.” Hayden suggested.

“My guess is, he was out in the barn, working, when it happened,” Sheila said. “It probably didn’t happen in the house at all.”

“Is that what the man said?” Angela asked

“No. But don’t worry about it. The dead are not frightening.”

“What if he died in my room?” Angela speculated.

“That is so very unlikely. If he died in a bedroom it would probably be in your dad’s and mine, since it’s the master suite.”

James grimaced at the thought and went on eating, while his wife continued her speech.

“Good people when they die don’t become monsters. He was a good man. Even if his body were still here, there would be nothing to fear.”

“That’s an awful thought,” Hayden interjected, “A body on the premises.”

“What?” Angela cringed at the thought.

“A dead body in the house. Maybe there’s one in the basement.” Hayden chortled in amusement.

“Hush now. Don’t talk like that,” Sheila cautioned.

Angela turned to James, “Lynette bit me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Where did she bite you?”

She showed him the bruise that was forming on her leg. The bite marks were still clearly there. James shook his head and rested it on his hand, which was propped on the table.

“She is just at that age, you know.”

“No, I don’t know,” Angela retorted. “She didn’t get punished.”

“Your Mom knows about this?” James looked at Sheila, who shrugged. It was that special sort of look that parents give, talking without talking, the way all parents do when the kids are losing.

“How is she ever going to learn anything, if she gets rewarded every time she does something bad?” Angela asked.

“Babies bite. That’s the way things are. She’ll grow out of it.” James said.

Hayden finished eating and was sharing one of his sandwiches with Corky. Sheila and James started talking about something dull that concerned old people and their ordinary, everyday lives.

Angela didn’t want to hear it, so she took her Kool-Aid to the front room and turned on the TV. Corky was dragging a towel around the house, shaking it and throwing it in the air in an effort to get someone to play with him. Finally, Hayden grabbed the other end of the towel and led him outside. Lynette went with him. Angela tried to find a good channel to watch, which was hard because the cable had not yet been connected.

The bumping noise from upstairs started again. Sheila and James heard it too and went upstairs to check it out. Angela followed. As James opened the attic door, a foul smell seeped into the rest of the house. Angela and her parents’ backed away to breathe some fresh, clean air before proceeding into the room.

Downstairs the screen door slammed. The rush of feet resounded up the stairs.

“Nasty.” Lynette blurted out as she rounded the corner. James flipped on the attic light and entered first, followed by Angela, Lynette and Sheila.

A thick layer of dust covered everything. Old furniture lay tightly packed on the sides of the room, a stack of paintings rested against the wall, and there were more dolls, older dolls, weird dolls.

Angela looked to her left. A spider was about to touch her arm. She screeched and backed away. James came over to where she was standing, “It is just



a harmless little spider,” he said before he killed it. They watched James as he checked out every corner. There was nothing up there at all. Nothing alive, anyway.

Hayden stepped in the door. “What’s going on?” he queried.

“There was a noise, a bumping sound.” James said.

“I heard a scream,” Hayden exclaimed.

“You know how your sister is about spiders.” James said.

Hayden rolled his eyes, gave her a look and said, “Do I ever.”

“What? It almost bit me,” she squealed as her defense.

A shutter flew open with a gust of wind. James smiled and went over to secure it in the open position. “See, there is a rational explanation. I’m going to leave it open for a few hours just to air out the place,” he said as he left the area.

Lynette stuffed some pins in a faceless doll that had corn shucks streaming out from the neck like a cape. Sheila forced the doll out of Lynette’s hand and told her to leave the doll up there.

Lynette protested with her whole body, as only a three-year-old can. She snatched the doll back and held on tight while Sheila pried it out of her hands. Wailing echoed down the hallway as Mom led her to her room and dragged out a doll that she’d brought from home.

Angela and Hayden continued to explore the attic. The room held pieces of broken chairs and a chest full of boxes of memorabilia and old baby clothes. Hayden found a box of war medals and photos. Angel picked up a jewelry box. There were several pieces of costume jewelry in it.

One of the pieces caught her eye. She placed it around her neck. Angela loved jewelry and didn't discriminate. She put on all the necklaces and bracelets she could, to take them back to her room.

Before they left the attic, she had caught sight of a doll that had half a face sewed onto it. For a minute she thought she saw the doll blink, but she knew that wasn't possible. "How odd," she muttered, "When we came into this room, that doll didn't even have a face."

"Sure it did," Hayden argued.

"No, I looked at all the dolls. That doll and the one that Lynette was playing with didn't have faces."

"Your delusional. Nothing up here has changed."

"I know what I saw."

"How can that be? You expect me to believe that a doll is growing eyes?"

"No, Hayden, I don't expect anything from you," she said and stomped out the door ahead of him.

## Chapter 2

That night Angela lay in her room thinking about the encounters so far. When they first arrived, they'd heard about the death of the old couple, mysterious deaths. Her mind had been filled with horror stories. When she came in the house, her mind was full of that nonsense.

No wonder that when she entered the dusty, mysterious attic she thought she saw a doll's eye blink. She was expecting something odd to happen, so naturally, it did. But it wasn't real. It couldn't have been. No one else noticed. Could it have been a reflection of light falling across the doll's face? Dolls don't blink. It had to be a result of her overactive imagination.

In the middle of the night, Angela felt a presence in the room. She was still under the covers, but Corky was gone. Someone or something was there. Half asleep and trying to get up, Angela heard voices echoing in her head--high-pitched

little voices. She glanced around the room and saw that all the dolls had their faces turned toward her.

Angela flipped on the light and examined the dolls. Each doll had a faint face. They looked as if someone had taken a pen and marked in their features. 'Lynette must have done this,' she thought as she turned out the light, lay back down and covered her head. 'She must have come in here, scribbled faces on all of them and turned them to face my bed.'

As Angela dosed off, she thought she heard music. A soft beating of the drums was soon joined by a humming noise. She sat up and looked around. The female dolls were slowly stepping onto her bed as they hummed.

"What's going on here?" Angela asked. As she sat up, two male corn silk dolls stepped through the door wearing red and purple native attire complete with turbans and leather moccasins. One guided a roll of duct tape toward the bed with a long sword; the other was beating a drum.

'How weird,' Angela thought. 'This is weird, really weird.'

The female dolls on the bed danced, stepping three steps to the left. In unison, they swayed to the right and lifted their hands, before making a full circle. They hummed an odd harmonious tune in a minor chord as they repeated the motions.

Angela felt drowsy and slumped back down in the reclining position. Though she wasn't physically restrained, she felt limp and weak in the soft cushion of her bed. She found herself enchanted with the music and moved her head, humming in concert with the dolls.

They danced until the dolls had made the complete circle of her bed three times. Once completed, the drums stopped. A glowing light shot through the window, piercing the dolls and causing them to squeal with delight as they gained renewed strength and energy. When the light faded each doll had grown taller and stronger. They each breathed deeply, then fixed a piercing green stare on one another. Once all the eyes had connected, they simultaneously focused their eyes on Angela, who had begun to tremble.

The dolls celebrated with a loud cry, lifted their hands together in the center of the bed and joined in a frenetic dance, moving in a follow-the-leader fashion. This time, one of the male dancers was leading the line, followed by the twelve female dolls and ending with the other male dancer that was beating the drum. The dolls wrapped Angela in tape then carried her out into the hall and up to the attic.

Angela tried to yell, but they stopped her by gluing her mouth shut with some sticky substance before she passed out. She found herself in the attic with them, sitting at the table. The dolls flew back to their original places and didn't re-emerge. 'What am I going to do now?' she thought. 'Here I am wrapped like a package. Who's going to find me? Great!' As the night wore on, she rolled over onto the floor and struggled to get loose but made no progress at all.

When Angela awoke, she was in her own bed; the duct tape was gone, and she was rolled up in her blanket. She quickly unrolled herself. 'Wow! no one will believe this,' she thought. 'I have to tell my family about this. It's so strange.' As she got out of bed, Corky rushed up to greet her.

Angela headed downstairs for breakfast. James nodded at her as she entered the room and then continued sipping his coffee. Sheila was putting dishes in the dishwasher, "Sleep well?" she asked.

"I had this weird dream."

"Tell me about it," James said as he pushed his coffee cup aside.

"Dolls were in my room dancing to a drumbeat and humming. Two male dolls bound me up in duct tape and carried me off to the attic. They glued my mouth shut. I couldn't get loose."

"Then what?"

"I finally woke up and was wrapped up in my bed covers."

James chuckled, "Sounds like you've had a rough night."

"Well, I had a weird dream too, and so did your father," Sheila said as she stepped closer to the table. "I think it's time for us to drop all that ghostly talk."

"Maybe so," Angela agreed as she poured herself a bowl of Cheerios.

Sheila started to wipe down the cabinet. "Hey, how did this doll get in here?" she asked. "Did you bring a doll in here Angela?"

"No."

"Maybe it was there all the time," James suggested as he took the last sip of his coffee and stood to leave.

"No, I wiped the cabinets down last night, and it wasn't there."

Lynette came into the room carrying her teddy bear and climbed up in a chair.

"Morning, Lynette," Sheila said. "Did you put this doll over here?"

“What doll?”

“The one on the cabinet.”

“No.”

Sheila placed a bowl of cereal in front of Lynette and walked out onto the porch with James.

The girls ate their breakfast in silence. Hayden came in and parked himself at the kitchen table. “I went down and investigated the basement.” Hayden said.

“There’s all kinds of neat stuff down there. But it’s a bit creepy.”

“Creepy?” Angela inquired.

“Yes, the place smelled awful, and the wall moved.”

“Uggh,” Angela responded.

“Or, I guess I should say, it sort of exhaled.”

“Yuck.”

“Yes, but I found this old croquet set down there.”

“What’s croquet?” Lynette asked

“It’s a game. You knock balls through metal hoops and stuff.”

“Like basketball?” Lynette asked.

Angela picked a plum from the fruit basket.

“Not exactly,” Hayden continued. “I’m going to set it up in the front yard, and we can play it later.”

“Anything else going on?” Angela asked.

“Our neighbor, from the house down the street, came over and told mom and dad that his kids were going to meet at the pond for a picnic today, and we’re invited.”

“Really? There’s a pond?” Angela took a bite of the plum, “Do all the kids hang out there?”

“Apparently. We’re going to meet them at noon.”

After breakfast, Angela retreated to her room to pick out something special to wear. She took full stock of herself in the mirror, combed her hair and changed it from hanging down to a ponytail. While she was searching through her things, considering whether to wear her new shorts or a pair of jeans, something dark slithered across the floor and went under the dresser.

Angela squealed, jumped up on the bed with both feet and waited patiently, but nothing came out. Finally, she snatched a magazine off of the bedside table and slapped at the dresser hoping to scare whatever it was out, but nothing happened.

She quickly changed into shorts, buttoned up her blouse and opened her door to leave. When she stepped out, she was tackled by the finger paint freight train. Lynette’s embrace left Angela’s hair blue with the same goop Lynette had spread on her tee-shirt. “Crap, Why me?” Angela mumbled, “Why must it always be me? ”

“Crap? Crap,” Lynette said as she rubbed more yuck in Angela’s hair and on her jeans.

Angela took Lynette to the bathroom with her to wash up. She rubbed the sticky goo off of Lynette’s face. Lynette responded with “Crap.”



“Yes, it is crap. And you’re covered in it.”

“Crap, crap, crap,” Lynette continued to practice her new word, giggling after each new rendition.

When the girls finished scrubbing the goo away, they bounced down the stairs while Lynette laughed, practicing her new word. Mom was out on the porch gabbing on the phone.

Hayden walked past them in the hall.

“Crap,” Lynette said, winning a surprised glance from her brother.

Angela opened the front door and gently shoved Lynette in the direction of her mother and headed down the front steps to have a look around. Sunlight glistened off the flowers and foliage surrounding the porch. Angel wandered around looking at all the plants close to the house. She’d never seen a house surrounded with so many colorful primrose bushes.

After an hour or so, Angela strolled into the kitchen to get a drink. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a dark object run across the floor again. She dived for a kitchen chair, landing on the table with both feet drawn up tight.

The critter quit running as the winding noise teetered out. The toy rat flopped over on its side. A thick cloud of dirt and grime lunged through the doorway and leaned against it. The creature was the one true terror that would never go away, Hayden. He casually poked his hands in his pockets, cackled out loud and strolled coolly into the room, “Had you going, didn’t I?”

“It’s not funny, Hayden,” she said as she gave him a stone-faced glare.

“I really had you going upstairs. You should have seen your face when that rat scurried under the dresser.” He chortled as he collected his toy.

“You were in my room!”

“I just wanted to see how you’d react.”

“That’s my private territory! You’re not supposed to be in there. That’s where I change. You were watching me?”

“No. I didn’t watch! God no!”

“You pervert!”

“No. Honest, I turned my head. No way would I want to see,” he held his hand toward his sister and turned his head away. “That, yuck! My sister? I would never look at my sister that way.”

“But I just changed clothes in there.”

“That was an unexpected disappointment,” Hayden said as he rewound the rat

Angela looked at him with a slack jaw and rolled her eyes in a downcast glance across the room.

“You were already dressed for the day,” he continued as he set the rat down again. The rat ran to the back door and flopped over on its side. “How was I supposed to know you were going to do something stupid like that.”

“Where were you hiding?”

“Behind the curtain,” Hayden explained as he lowered himself to pick up the toy rat. “God, you could have seen me easy enough if you weren’t so busy looking at yourself.”

Angela crawled off the table and followed Hayden as he rewound the rat.

“Where did you get that thing?” Angela asked.

“The treasure trove in the basement,” he said as he tossed the rat in the air.

“Come on, Mom and Lynette haven’t seen it yet. Let’s go surprise them.”

### Chapter 3

Angela raced ahead of her brother and turned to look back at him as they proceeded toward the pond, “I never expected mom to react so violently.”

“Who knew?”

“The way she was squealing on the porch, it was hard to believe that she wasn’t a bigger baby than Lynette.”

“Really.”

“I mean. Lynette was just laughing, but Mom really freaked.”

“Funny. So funny.”

“This is going to be a fun summer after all.”

“Got to be.”

“Where’d you put the rat?”

“I wound it up and stuck it in the fridge.”

“Hayden. That’s mean! Mom’s going to really lose it.”

“I know.”

“I’d love to see that.”

“Yeah, me too. But I don’t want to be there when it happens. She’d kill me.”

“She’s going to kill both of us.”

“Maybe I should go back and get it out of there before she finds it.”

“It may already be too late. Besides, we’re almost at the pond. Let’s just forget about it until we get back. Maybe she’ll be over her mad spell by then.”

There were only three kids at the pond, two girls and a boy.

Angela strolled over to the picnic table where two girls were sitting. One of them, the redhead, was about Angela’s age. She was listening attentively to a gypsy girl, who was wrapped in a blue sheet and was wearing lots of jewelry. Angela sat down to listen while Hayden greeted Terry, a tall, lean, dark brunette boy who sported a bad haircut and baggy jeans. Corky sniffed out the area next to the pond.

“What else do you see?” asked the redhead.

“You will lose all your possessions, but you will be fine. Your family will be fine,” and looking down at the little dog she added, “Your dog will suffer no harm, but all else will vanish.”

“What do you mean?” The redhead probed further.

“It’s not for me to say,” the gypsy girl answered as she rolled her devilish green eyes back and removed the sheet from her head. She was older than the rest of the kids. She smiled at Angela and said, “Hi, I’m Christine.”

“I’m Angela.”

“She’s Gala,” Christine said. Gala smiled and nodded, apparently deep in thought about the prediction she had just heard. “My brother told me about the brave new family that moved into the Bradfords’ haunted house.”

“Haunted?” Angela asked as the other girls snickered and exchanged glances.

Gala, who was adjusting her turquoise headband, said, “Don’t let her scare you: anytime a house sits vacant for a while, Christine calls it haunted. She thinks it sounds more important, that’s all.”

The boys came over to the table. Hayden opened the bag of lunchmeat sandwiches. Christine got up to serve the tea she’d brought. She set out a bag of cookies for dessert.

“Oh, wow! That looks great,” Angela said. “Did you make them?”

“Yes,” Christine said with a smile.

“Christine’s quite the cook,” Gala said. “She spends a lot of time in the kitchen stirring up stuff.”

“Really?” Angela said as she bit into a fresh chocolate chip cookie.

“I watched mom cook forever,” Christine said, “then somehow, I just picked it up. She’d tell me to do something, and I’d do it, and next thing I knew, it was coming pretty natural to me.”

“Awesome!”

Terry stepped forward and offered Angela his hand. “Terry,” he said.

Angela offered him a gentle grin as their hands met. “Angela.”

She thought he was the best looking guy she’d seen since she left home and had a hard time keeping her eyes off of him.

Christine returned and filled the cups with green tea.

“After lunch, we’re going to have to play ‘Big Bootie,’” Terry said.

“We don’t have enough people.” Gala said before she took a bite of her sandwich.

“Sure we do. Five people can play it.”

“It’d be better with a few more people.”

“What is it?” Angela asked.

“It’s a fun game. I’ll teach you,” Terry said. The kids were quiet for a few minutes while they munched away at the lunch.

“There’s a crazy lady who lives just over the hill,” Terry said.

“Really?” Hayden asked.

“You might see crazy Marian out and about occasionally,” Terry said as he helped himself to another glass of tea. “She has a crooked smile. You couldn’t mistake her for anyone else.”

Christine and Terry nodded at each other. “I think she’s been responsible for some of the disappearances of the residents in this area,” Terry suggested.

“No way,” Hayden said.

“They’ll never prove it.” Terry said.

“She experiments with evil rituals,” Terry said. He pointed off toward the left, “Her house isn’t far away. We could check it out.”

“You mean spy on her?” Angela asked. “I’m not so sure that I’m comfortable with that.”

“I am. Where’s the house?” Hayden asked.

“About half a mile away,” Terry said.

“Wouldn’t it be cool to go see what she’s up to?” Hayden suggested. “You know, just take a poke around.”

“You’d be meddling in the world of the unknown,” Christine said.

“So? You do it all the time,” Terry said.

“I’m just playing. I wouldn’t do anything evil. I wouldn’t touch any of those things in there.”

“But you do know which things to leave alone and which ones are safe, don’t you?” Terry continued.

“Sure, I’ve read about all that stuff, but just because I’m curious. It’s like the fortune telling. I know something about it, but to me, it is just a game. I don’t believe any of it.”

While they were eating lunch, one of the cows from across the field came up to the fence in a hurry, followed by three others. When they saw that they were fenced off from the pond, they turned and went down the hill.

Terry said, “They only open the fence to this pond when it’s extremely dry. Their main water spot is past that other clump of trees.”



A man on a horse rode up to the fence. "That's our dad," Christine said. The man waved at the kids, and they waved back at him. "We've lived here forever. Mom and Dad moved here from Tennessee four years before I was born and have been here ever since."

"Time to play Big Bootie," Terry announced. The kids all sat in a circle with crossed legs as Terry explained the rules of 'Big Bootie'

"You clap your hands like this," he said as he slapped both hands against his thighs, then clapped them in front of him. The other kids joined in the rhythmic movements rather quickly.

"Then we number off. Someone has to be the lead. That's me. I'll be 'Big Bootie.' I say Biiig Bootie, Big Bootie, ohhhh, Big Bootie." Big Bootie to the one." Terry stopped clapping and the rest of the kids paused as well. "And the one says 'one to the three.' And the three says 'three' to the whatever number he wants to call out next, or he can toss it back to me by saying 'three to Big Bootie.'"

Terry started the clapping again and once the rhythm was going well he started the game "Ohhh, Big Bootie . . . Big Bootie to the three"

Gala was three, so she said "Three to the two."

Christine was two, so she responded with, "Two to the four."

Angela was four. Since it was her first time, she missed.

They laughed.

Terry said, "Okay, stop. Now if you don't come in on time and throw out a number, you're out and the circle becomes smaller and we all get new numbers."

"Oh, I didn't know."

“We’re just going to practice a couple of times to make sure you guys get it, then we’ll go at it for real.”

“Great!”

“Oh, and I forgot to tell you. It gets faster and faster as we go along. So keep up.”

They nodded at each other and started off with the practice sessions. Soon, the game was in full swing.

They occupied themselves for a few rounds until they tired of sitting. When they stood up, Terry introduced them to the game of ‘Yah,’ a very similar game played standing in a circle. There was no clapping, but it started off with a yell straight out of the old kung fu movies, a ‘yah’ yell.

After a long play session they took a break and resorted to taking turns at the swing.

The boys started tossing the baseball again, so the girls took a little walk around the pond. The girls made a full circle back to the picnic area, and Christine started throwing sticks in the pond. Gala and Angela took turns at the tire swing.

While Angela waited her turn, she thought about what the kids had said earlier and thought that the dolls in her house might be connected to this insane woman she’d been hearing about. She decided that Hayden was right; they should go and check out the old woman’s house.

Christine sat down at the table across from Angela. “Let me tell your fortune,” she said.

“I don’t really believe in it,” Angela exclaimed.

“Neither do I, but what else is there to do out here? It’ll be fun.”

Angela reluctantly agreed. Gala hurried over and sat beside Angela.

Christine pulled her hair straight back and placed the scarf up over her head, as she pretended to be going into her trance. “Give me your hand,” Christine demanded.

Angela did as she was told. She looked more closely at Christine’s face than she had before. She saw a jagged scar just over Christine’s left eyebrow. The skin was fairly light against Christine’s tan face.

Christine looked at Angela’s right palm and said, “Hmm, mysterious, yes,” she went on, “Very mysterious, yes? Very mysterious indeed.”

Angela thought Christine was being a little silly but played into her delusion. “What do you see?”

“I see a weirdness about you. Not you, but surrounding you—a magnet, if you will—that sucks in creatures from the unknown. I see,” she continued, “I see little people that vex you.”

“Oh, you mean my sister, Lynette,” Angela suggested.

“Not her, no, it’s very mysterious indeed. Oh, do watch your step. I mean literally watch it, for they may give you a very bad fall. You must be strong and fight,” Christine added. Then she sat back, pulled the sheet off her head, and held out her hand, “Five dollars please,” she demanded. They girls chuckled in unison.

The kids heard a cat meowing and started looking around, as Christine reached in her pocket and pulled out her phone as it emitted another meow sound. “Hello . . .” She chatted for a minute while the other girls chuckled. When she

hung up, she stood up and yelled, "Terry, we have to go," Christine said as she gathered up her things, draped her scarf over her shoulder, and hurried off. "See you guys later."

Terry and Gala said their good-byes and hurried off with her.

On the way home, Hayden told Angela he had been invited to watch the ball practice, if mom would let him; of course, mom would have no problem with that.

## Chapter 4

Hayden and Terry came in from ball practice famished. They raided the fridge for sandwich fixings and plunked down in the front room. James was already in there, reading the paper.

“I’ve never stayed in a haunted house before,” Terry said before he bit into his hoagie.

“You’re not staying in one tonight either,” James said. “This house is not haunted. I don’t know where you kids get these ideas.”

“Probably from their fathers,” Sheila echoed with a chuckle.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked. Sheila laughed and fanned his comment away.

Terry and Hayden talked about the ballgame coming up in a few days.

Hayden said, “If I had my old camera, I could take a lot of photos there.”

“That’d be so cool,” Terry said. “I’d especially love to have a big picture of me crossing home plate, to hang on my wall.”

“If I had a camera, I’d do it,” Hayden responded. “I had one last year, but Mom ran over it.”

Sheila piped in, “I still don’t know what it was doing in the driveway. How did it get there anyway?”

Hayden shrugged, “Don’t know.”

“Honestly, if you’d have picked it up that never would have happened.”

“Okay, that was last year,” James said as he tossed his paper aside. “It’s over. Let’s forget it. You can get another camera.”

“Maybe for my birthday?” Hayden asked.

“Maybe so,” James agreed. “Who knows?”

Sheila crossed her arms and grunted, “What are you planning James?”

“I’m planning on going outside to set up the croquet game,” he answered. He headed for the door then turned back and asked, “You kids want to help?”

The boys eagerly assisted James, but not with any more enthusiasm than Lynette, who continually moved the game pieces around to suit herself. Angela and Sheila watched from the porch, not joining in until the wires and poles were set.

The first time Angela hit a ball, she saw a large corn silk doll standing on the other side of the lawn. It looked like the one in the attic, the one that blinked at her. The doll’s appearance was momentary, but it happened several times during the game. Each time the eyes shot out evil flashes of green light.

While the game went on, Angela had trouble staying focused. She became more and more concerned about the creature she was seeing and began thinking about what had happened to her the other night when the dolls had attacked her in her dream. For a brief moment, she thought she saw one of the dolls standing on the porch flashing green light out onto the lawn through its eyes. No one else acted as though they noticed.

She began to wonder whether the old man was right. Perhaps there was something evil connected with this house. Finally, she backed away from the game and watched as the family continued to play.

Hayden and Terry had a lot of fun slapping high fives every time they whacked a ball successfully through a hoop. Lynette ran all over the place striking balls other than her own. She swung at them, always hitting the wrong balls and shooting them into the wrong direction. Occasionally, she would move a bracket or a stop bar, messing up the order of the game.

No one took the game or the little girl and her free-spirited antics seriously. The whole family simply cackled as if she were the cutest little twit in the world.

Corky ran after the balls and barked. He couldn't get one in his mouth. They were much too big, so he would dive at them and scoot them with his nose.

Sheila and James played a few rounds, then sat on the porch with Angela and watched. Angela's brief view of a doll in the bushes had gone away, but she was still upset about it. She couldn't take her eyes off of the game, even though not much of anything was happening.

A little later, when it was getting dark, James and Sheila took Lynette in and left Angela to her thoughts on the porch.

Corky snuggled up next to Angela. They both watched as the boys picked up the game and carried it to the barn. Angela hugged Corky more tightly than usual and gazed into the distance. She thought for a moment that she saw a cluster of small dolls standing in the bushes. She trembled all the way down to her heels. The cluster of dolls disappeared and Angela knew she was just looking at a lot of bushes, not dolls at all.

The boys made a great deal of noise laughing and talking as they came back around the house. Angela, who had been frozen with fear, breathed a sign of relief.

As the three of them stepped in the front door, Sheila squealed in the kitchen. James laughed out loud as Sheila barked, "It's really not funny."

"Yes, it is. Where did that come from?"

Angela listened as her mother explained about the antics this morning with the toy rat and all the fun that the kids had with it. Hayden grinned from ear to ear, knowing they finally got a belated laugh out of the rat, but made certain that he was out of sight when his mother and dad entered the room.

Angela curled up on the couch next to her father, who was still chuckling when he answered the phone. "Harrison here," he said. He put his arm around his daughter. "Um hum . . . okay . . . I'll check into it tomorrow," he said as he hung up the phone.

Angela snuggled next to her dad and trembled. "There, there, whatever is the matter?" he asked, not paying attention to Lynette, who was running around the



room playing with a corn silk doll, tossing it in the air and slamming it against the floor. She stopped and squeezed its neck, then twisted its head backward.

“I don’t want to stay here anymore,” Angela insisted. “Can’t we move into town? Or better yet, we could go back home.”

“Crap,” Lynette muttered as she bounced a doll against the wall.

James kissed Angela’s forehead. “I know it’s rough moving from town to town every summer. You miss your friends, don’t you?”

“Yes, but I really don’t like this place.”

“Come on Angela. This is one of the nicest arrangements we’ve ever had, a monstrous house and an entire farm. You should love it here,” James insisted.

“We’ve been having so much fun. I can’t imagine why you would want to leave.”

Sheila came in and sat across from them. Lynette continued to slap the doll around. “You’re crap, just full of crap,” she said.

Sheila looked at Lynette, “Where does she get these words?”

“Well, I haven’t been having any fun.”

“Why not? What’s troubling you?” Sheila asked.

By this time Angela had stopped shaking. She picked up one of the dolls that Lynette had been playing with. She stood before her parents and shook it.

“These dolls are evil. I just know it.”

“Angela!” James gasped. “They’re just dolls.”

“It’s true! I know it’s true!” Angela continued. She pulled away from her dad and tossed the doll off to the side, bouncing its head on the floor.

“You’ve been watching way too many movies,” Sheila said as she curled her feet up on the sofa.

No one responded.

Hayden and Terry stepped inside the front room.

Sheila said, “Come on now, Angela. These are just dolls. I know you want to go home, but trying to make us believe that these little dolls are evil is a bit much.”

“She’s serious,” James suggested. “She wouldn’t lie to us. She really believes.”

“You’ve been letting her watch too many scary movies,” Sheila said as she shook her finger at her husband.

James dropped his jaw as he addressed his wife, “But she loves those movies. We all do.” He gave a knowing glance at his wife and said, “I mean, almost all of us.”

“Don’t try to make this some sort of battle between you and me,” Sheila snapped as she pointed her finger in his face. “Just because I don’t like horror movies is no reason to be short with me.”

“I wasn’t being short.”

“Shit, James. You’re always snapping at me.”

A moment of silence filled the air. “Shit,” Lynette said. All eyes fell on her.

“Now look what you’ve done,” James pointed out.

Lynette practiced her new word again, only louder, “Shit.”

“You’ve added another word to Lynnette’s growing vocabulary.”

The parents bickered while Lynette ran around the room practicing her new word.

Angela mumbled to herself, “They don’t believe me!” She looked at her parents and muttered. “I can’t believe you’d think I’d make that up!” But no one heard her. Sheila and James took their heated discussion to the front porch. Terry and Hayden picked out a movie and put it in the DVD player.

Angela glared zombie-like at the TV screen while her parents continued to argue, even after they’d gone upstairs. The boys laughed and enjoyed the evening, but Angela couldn’t enjoy anything just now. The only reason she stayed downstairs was to be with someone. She dreaded going to her room and put off doing so for as long as possible.

## Chapter 5

Not far away Christine rounded the corner of her parents' home and hurried toward the gate. She stopped and shoved a white spaghetti strap up over her shoulder and secured the ribbon in her hair before she struggled to open the latch. She'd always had trouble opening the latches that her father had made. They were much too heavy, too manly for her tiny hands.

After a struggle, she finally swung the gate open and hurried toward a copse of trees out in the field not far from the pond where she and her boyfriend had always met. This would be the first time she'd seen him in a couple of weeks. He'd been gone on vacation. They'd had a spat before he left. She was anxious to make up, to let him know that he really mattered to her, that she really cared.

Her parents would have been furious to know that she'd been sneaking out. It was her secret. Even Terry didn't know. Her best friends didn't know. But she

had to see Johnny. They'd known each other too long, shared too many memories, held each other too many times to toss it all in the trash. She needed to explain why she'd shoved him aside. It wasn't him or anything he'd said or done. It was all her. She was unsure of herself, unsure of her future. They were too young. He had to accept that. He had to be made to understand that she wanted to graduate first before making a major, life-changing commitment.

As she ran toward their meeting place in the middle of a cluster of trees, an arm reached out and grasped her from behind. "Ekkk," she screamed as he snatched her off the ground and twirled her in the air. Her scream turned into laughter. Soon their blood boiled with passion as their bodies embraced. She'd forgotten how warm and wonderful she felt in his arms. He held her as they kissed. Their bodies continued the embrace as they walked together in silence.

Now that he was home, she couldn't go through with it. She couldn't put them on hold. She caved to his touch and never mentioned her plan to push him aside. Johnny was so attentive, so gentle, and he made the Earth move for her. This was her heaven, these moments in the arms of her hero. Nothing could be better than this.

Once the moon had moved across the sky thirty degrees, Christine gave him one last kiss and started home, giggling and laughing all the way. She skipped along without a care, glad that he was home and that she hadn't mentioned any of her previous concerns.

A small dark cloud slowly covered the moon, obscuring the path before her. She hadn't had this problem all evening. God knows, it must have been the

only cloud in the sky. Darkness engulfed the area as Christine stumbled down the path, unable to see clearly. She thought she heard someone in the bushes and slowed down in the hopes that Johnny would snatch her up again, but that didn't happen. Instead, little footsteps drew near where she was standing, and she could see clearly enough to know that Johnny was nowhere near.

As she continued on the dirt path toward home, many tiny footsteps kept up with her own, catching her attention and causing her to pause and look back. Long shadows brushed across the path as the wind blew through the trees, and the moon emerged partially from behind the cloud.

Christine looked back, shook her head, and dismissed the noise as the wind. When she looked forward again she caught a glimpse of a small creature darting across her path. She didn't know what it was, a rabbit or a rat, but one thing was for certain: something deep within shook her to her bones. Christine wrapped her arms around her shoulders and wished she were still wrapped in Johnny's arms. But even he couldn't calm the trembling that had gripped her.

As she walked on, she heard the footsteps again, but this time she also heard voices muttering. She heard one of them say, "She's mine." Christine quickened her pace. She jogged toward her home, but the footsteps kept up with her. She looked back and saw several small creatures with beady little eyes flashing green light on the path and directly on her. She turned toward home and ran faster than she'd ever run before.

'Just one last hill and then I'm home,' she thought. 'I'll be safe there, one last hill.' Christine darted over the hill and immediately stumbled on a branch in

the path. She busted her nose on a rock, splattering blood all over her face, drenching her white top.

She tried to get up and run in spite of the blood, but several small dolls lunged at her, getting blood all over themselves. They struggled there in the path. The dolls forced Christine to lie on her back. Blood rolled down her throat, choking her. She rolled over the dolls and tried to get up and run again, but they kept shoving her down. One doll kept getting in her face. Christine slapped it and tried to free herself from its grasp, but it held onto her cheeks. She finally leaned close to the rock where she'd busted her nose and attempted to smash its head against the rock, which was covered in her own blood.

The doll ducked its head and lunged hard into Christine's breast. Christine crumbled in pain and grabbed at her chest. Her nose continued to drip blood on her arm and over the dolls that got in the way. Once again, she tried to stand. She succeeded and took off in a dead run, but the dolls kept up. One of the dolls tripped her. The doll that had been in her face before stood back and watched as the other dolls held her down. In a flash the doll lunged at Christine's face, stretching its mouth abnormally wide, large enough to extend its lips to cover Christine's nose and lips, smothering her. The doll lay on top of her until all movement stopped. The small army of dolls slowly backed away and wandered off into the darkness.

As Christine lay motionless, the little doll became rigid as an icicle and fell to one side, dazed and confused. Christine sat up and tossed her hair back over her shoulder. The scar on her forehead disappeared. Her eyes flashed a green light

toward her home. She stood up leaving, the doll in the blood and dust as she walked stiffly toward her home, wiping the blood from her face. Her gait loosened slightly as she walked. When she approached the gate, she easily loosened it, smirked with a confident grin and strolled toward the house.



## Chapter 6

That night Angela was resting really well when Corky began barking. She told him to be quiet, and he was still for a few minutes, then he wanted out of the room. Once Angela opened the door, he raced down the staircase and scratched at the door.

He stayed outside a long time, barking at the bushes at the end of the yard. Angela called for him to come in several times, but he ignored her.

Finally, when he did come in, he ran up the stairs, then turned to look back at the door. His hair bristled on his back, and he barked more fiercely than before.

Before Angela closed the door, she caught a glimpse of something moving in the bushes and froze. There, facing the door, stood a cluster of dolls covered in blood.

Angela slammed the door and yelled, but no one came. Corky barked and pranced a while longer before calming down and going to the kitchen for a drink.

Boards creaked as someone descended the staircase. Hayden skipped down the stairs in his pajamas. "I heard a scream," he said.

"It's the dolls! A lot of bloody dolls! They're alive!"

"You're nuts!"

"They're outside in the bushes," Angela insisted.

He looked out the window. "I don't see anything."

"They were in the bushes a minute ago."

"Where? If there was something out there, Corky would be going nuts."

Hayden said as he sat down on the bottom stair step.

Terry stepped out of the bathroom and joined the other kids downstairs.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Corky was barking fiercely just a few minutes ago," Angela said.

Terry observed Corky sitting quietly at Angela's feet. "Well, whatever it was doesn't seem to be bothering him now," Terry said.

Hayden looked out the window, "Nothing, nothing at all."

"I'm not lying," Angela remained adamant. "Corky was barking at them. If Corky could talk, he'd be on my side."

"He was probably barking at a squirrel," Hayden suggested.

"I know what I saw," Angela said as she petted her little dog.

"Go back to sleep." Hayden said as he and Terry groggily climbed the staircase. Angela went back to bed but left her night-light on.

## Chapter 7

A couple of days later, Angela awoke to music blaring across the hall. Apparently Hayden was already awake. Angela covered her head.

Lynette Day had arrived. It had once been an ordinary day, July second, but because Lynette had burst into the world on that day four years ago, this day was marked forever after as Lynette Day. Angela knew that mom would go nuts preparing for it, cooking, hanging ribbons and balloons, and blowing the whole shebang out of all proportion.

Dad was no better. The sun rose and set with Lynette. She would get more presents than she would know how to open, and the whole stage was set for a four-year-old to toddle around while the rest of the family watched and giggled.

But not Angela. Lynette was no laughing matter to Angela. When Lynette came into the world, all it meant to Angela was less lap time for her, smaller birthday parties, and more special requests from her parents: ‘Honey could you get that?’ ‘Angela, could you get the phone?’ ‘Sweetie, could you get the baby wipes?’ ‘Hand me the diaper bag, please.’

Angela had seen this sort of shifting of the roles, and she wasn’t so sure that she liked it. Her birthday was July thirtieth, four weeks after the big event. Oh, they celebrated her birthday all right. Every year for the past three years, there were enough leftover balloons and ribbons from Lynette’s party to throw a bash, though the stash had diminished and the family seemed less enthusiastic.

They always bought presents. But there’s no way to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ twice in one month with great enthusiasm. She could see it coming now. Crepe paper and balloons all over the house for Lynette. Much of it would be lost in the clean up, but a few ribbons would be stuffed in a bag with the balloons that were left over. The sack would be stored in the broom closet and pulled out again for Angela’s birthday, only to be swept away an hour after the event.

Angela buried her head deep under the covers.

“Angela,” Hayden called as he rapped on the door while music from his CD blasted through the doorway.

“What?” Angela screamed.

Deafened by the noise from the player, he didn’t answer.

Angela opened her door while she fastened her robe.

Hayden turned down the music on the boom box perched on his shoulder, “Are you going to sleep all day? It’s noon already.”

“So?”

“Mom wants you downstairs.”

Angela sauntered down the stairs. She had to fight her way through the streamers and balloons to see Lynette sandwiched in between a pile of dolls, ribbons, and a spattering of toys. Corky raced around, playing with a crepe paper streamer.

“Oh there you are,” Sheila called. “Are you feeling okay this morning?”

“Yeah, sure. Why?”

“You slept so late,” Sheila said as she tied off the end of a balloon. “And you’re still in your robe.”

“Hayden woke me up. And I haven’t had time to dress.”

“Well fine,” she said half-ignoring Angela while she secured the balloon to the clothes rack in the corner. “Go eat some breakfast. You’ll find some cereal on the counter. Then get dressed. We have a lot of work to do.”

Angela went into the kitchen and found the Post Toasties box almost empty. She emptied the contents in a bowl, drenched it in milk, poured herself a small glass of orange juice, took up a comic book and read while she devoured her food.

When she returned to the front room, Sheila said, “You can help by picking up Lynette’s toys while I wrap the presents.”

“Lynette should help.”

“She will,” Sheila turned to address the birthday girl. “Lynette, let’s put your toys away now, then we’ll get you ready for the party.”

Angela started picking up the toys, while Lynette protested by pulling out a new one every few minutes. Angela lay down on the sofa and went back to sleep.

Sheila pranced through the doorway with a big package wrapped in glistening metallic pink paper, topped with a monstrous yellow ribbon. “Don’t let your sister open this,” Sheila said, “It’s a surprise.”

Lynette rushed over to the package, but Angela pulled her back. She lunged for it again. Angela pulled her back again. The third time Lynette started to whimper.

Sheila burst through the doorway. “What’s wrong now?” She asked.

“Lynette won’t leave her present alone.”

“I was afraid of that. I’ll find a place to hide it,” she said and left with the package.

Angela turned to address Lynette and shoved her, “Well, I hope you’re happy. ‘Lynette Day’ is here, you monstrous little brat.”

Lynette wailed. “You’re nasty. Angela, nasty.”

Sheila re-entered the room and snatched up her youngest daughter. “What happened to her?”

“She’s just spoiled and wants her package already.” Angela explained while Lynette continued to wail. “I’m going upstairs to get dressed,” she said and raced up the stairs.

When she finally came down for the festivities, the whole downstairs reeked of party scents, from the fresh flowers to the strawberry cake smothered in a lush pink frosting.

Streamers hung everywhere and slapped Angela in the face when she came through the doorways. Balloons covered the walls, ceiling and furniture. The whole family wore those pointed little party hats.

James made a grand entry with an armload of presents. He bounced through the door followed by one of his coworkers in a plaid shirt. "Surprise!" James yelled as he tossed the presents on the table close to the door. "Come on, everyone gather around. I brought presents for everyone," he said.

Sheila rolled her eyes at him, "Everyone? It's Lynette's birthday."

Lynette handed her dad and the visitor hats, which they promptly placed on their heads. The coworker nodded at the family and took a seat on a chair in the front room.

"Yes, a well-celebrated event. Here's a present for you," James said as he handed Sheila a box, "and one for you," he handed Hayden a box and hugged him, "one for Angela," and handed her a package while maintaining a big smile on his face, "and one for Lynette." He clapped his hands "Very well, then, open them." Angela and Hayden opened their packages while Lynette tore the ribbon and paper off her package to play with them without opening the box.

Sheila said, "I don't want to open a package for me on my daughter's birthday. How can her birthday be special if everyone gets a present?"

“Come now,” James explained. “Lynette has lots of presents. Angela has a birthday coming up in a few days. She needs at least one of her presents early, you see. And then when Angela . . . .” He stopped and took note of the disgruntled look on his wife’s face and the way her arms were folded, knowing he was in big trouble now. “Well, never mind.”

Sheila scowled, “Hayden’s birthday isn’t until October.”

“Yes, well now that’s a long time to wait for something special, now isn’t it?”

“Oh wow, a camera!” Hayden exclaimed. “Thanks Dad. I can have some real fun with this.”

Sheila left the room.

Angela pulled a beaded rosary bracelet from the box. “Oh, great! It’s just beautiful.”

Sheila strolled back through. “We’re not Catholic,” she snapped.

“Does it matter? It’s real pretty, and Angela likes it,” James explained.

The man in the plaid shirt interrupted, “James, I’ve got to be getting back to the work site.”

“Yes of course. I’ll drive you.” James walked outside. The family stepped out on the porch behind him.

The two men headed toward the old black Chevy truck in the drive.

“Wait a minute!” Sheila yelled. “You bought yourself a truck?”

“Yes, isn’t it grand?” James said with a big grin.

“No. That’s a major purchase. You didn’t discuss this with me.”



The parents argued loudly on the porch, carrying the conversation all the way out to the truck. Sheila yelled, "It's Lynette's birthday, but you bought yourself a present. What is wrong with you?"

James walked disgustedly toward his wife, while the coworker got in the passenger side of the shiny black antique. "This was not a major investment. It was merely a good deal."

"You can't keep it," Sheila said as she shook her forefinger at him. "You know that. It's too old, too ugly."

"Honey, don't spoil the fun," James took his wife by the shoulders in an attempt to kiss her. Sheila crossed her arms in front of herself and pulled away.

James spoke softly, "The kids are listening, and we have a guest. We can discuss this later, after I drop him off," he said. He drove his friend back to the work site.

Later that afternoon, Hayden put two hats on his big head side by side, and two on Lynette as well. Angela thought it was so fitting, seeing the both of them in horns. She couldn't let this occasion pass. She borrowed Hayden's camera and took many photos of the demon birthday girl and her older brother.

Once all the festivities drew to a close, Sheila and James gathered on the porch for a heated discussion about the truck.

The kids sat back to watch one of Lynette's new DVD's. Angela lay on the sofa with Corky on the floor beside her. She closed her eyes, but she could still hear the music and action of the television, though the pictures in Angela's mind were far different from the ones on the screen.

She could see the woods outside. The trees were mobile and inched closer and closer. They appeared to be breathing. A branch slapped her in the face, knocking her down, into a mud hole. The damp air engulfed her, as little roots tickled her legs, arms and face. She rolled and moved, trying to get away, but the roots kept attacking her, tickling her and tying her in a bundle. Angela struggled to free herself, but the mud in the bottom of the hole was so soft that she kept sinking deeper and deeper into the filth. A light at the top of the hole shined on the laughing faces of dolls and forest animals that were looking in at her. Voices from the movie echoed through her head with lighthearted singing and chatter.

All around her the blades of grass and the forest trees laughed at her and kept inching in closer and closer. She knew she was surrounded. She felt a flicker of a leaf against her nose, though it remained invisible. Angela wiggled and slapped at the weed annoying her face.

Once she grasped it, she opened her eyes. It wasn't a blade of grass at all, but a piece of crepe paper. Two demon-hatted kids had been tickling her with ribbons and wrapping her in crepe paper.

Fully awake, Angela remained uncomfortable about the dream. It'd been a real nightmare for her; she had been surrounded and attacked. However, the only nightmare in her world right now was her siblings. She brushed off the ribbon and joined in the laughter, glad to be safe in her own home. The only monsters surrounding her were familiar ones.

## Chapter 8

A couple of days later, in spite of the fact that the temperature had already kissed one hundred, the kids had promised to meet at the pond for the purpose of investigating the old shack. They knew nothing of it other than the rumor that Marian, a local nut-case, had lived there a long time ago and that it had been sitting empty ever since.

Angela and Hayden arrived about the same time that Gala did, but Terry was a half-hour late. He came racing toward the kids at the pond, waving his hands furiously. “You won’t believe what’s happened,” he said as he stopped in front of Hayden, staring directly at his face. “Christine’s gone.”

“What?” Hayden asked.

“She’s gone,” he said as Angela and Gala moved in close enough to hear. “We don’t know what happened. She simply got up in the middle of the night a couple of days ago and ran away. Dad and mom are out looking for her. They’ve

been calling all our friends. So far no one has seen her. Have you seen her anywhere?"

The kids shook their heads and looked at each other. "No," they replied.

Terry walked away and ran his hands through his hair, "I know. I know that there is possibility that she's . . ."

"That she's what?" Hayden asked.

"Oh never mind. I'm sure she'll show up. It's not like this hasn't happened before."

"Christine has run away before?" Gala asked.

"No I mean. She's not the only person to run away from this place," Terry tried to sound a little calmer. He looked directly at Gala as if the two of them held a secret. "It's a little dull out here, you know."

Hayden and Angela looked at each other and nodded.

Gala and Terry still held each other's gaze. "I'm sure she'll be back soon," Gala said, as if she wasn't altogether surprised. "What can we do to help?"

"Do you know where she is?" Terry asked.

"No," Gala said as she turned to walk away from him. "How could I?"

"She talks to you a lot," he said as he followed her. "Did she say anything?"

"Nothing, actually."

Terry turned to address Hayden and Angela, "Dad said I should go on about my usual business, and maybe she'd contact me."

"Did she take all her things?" Angela asked.

“Some of them.”

“She’ll probably be back. If she didn’t pack a lot of stuff, she can’t be going far. I know. I pack every summer, and I always pack a lot of stuff.”

“Yeah, that’s what dad said,” Terry nodded as he agreed. “She’ll probably be back for more clothes pretty soon.”

Remembering how she’d felt when she was mad at her parents, Angela asked, “Was there a fight?”

“Well, she and mom don’t agree some of the time, but I don’t think that’s it this time,” Terry said as he gazed off in the direction of the old house they were planning to explore. “Come on, let’s go to the old shack.”

“We don’t have to go today,” Hayden said.

“I want to go. I need to go. It really doesn’t matter what I do now,” Terry said as he turned toward the south. “Come on,” he said as he motioned for them to follow him.

On the way to the old house, the kids wiped sweat off their foreheads and talked about what type of surprises they might find there.

“Maybe Christine’s there,” Gala suggested.

Terry, who had been leading the hikers, turned to face her. He walked backward for a while and nodded, as if he thought that might be the perfect place for Christine to hide out. “No one ever goes there,” he said as he shrugged.

Trees engulfed the house, obscuring it from the road. Boards covered the downstairs windows, but the three planks that had covered the front door had been removed. Branches of overgrown thorny brush lined the front porch and the yard.

Yet, a couple of crooked paths remained. As the kids approached the house, chimes sounded from a nearby tree, though the wind wasn't sufficient to ruffle the leaves.

Corky started barking when the chimes sounded. The closer they got, the more he barked. Finally, he raced ahead of them and went deep inside. Scuffling and bumping noises pierced the air as the little dog charged wildly through the house then exited through the back door, followed by a black cat he'd encountered in the kitchen.

Hayden and Terry took the lead and entered first. Angela hung back and entered last. A sweet scent filled their noses when they stepped through the door. On the walls handwriting blared out rudely with dripping red and black marks in a foreign language. Doll parts and dolls were scattered about. The furniture was faded and in disrepair, yet the house had been freshly swept.

In the back room, a primitive corn silk warrior doll inched forward, but he froze in place as the boys entered the room. A purple turban held strands of corn silk close to his head. He stood still in his red and purple loincloth and moccasins and held his sword in front of him.

Angela and Gala wandered around scanning the strange sights in the house. They found a bunch of plastic bottles in the kitchen full of herbs.

The dining table in the center of the room held a large book. Gala dusted it off and opened it. She took a seat in the ladder-backed chair by the table, while Angela dusted the other chair clean and cautiously took a seat. "Spells and Incantations for the Enlightened," Gala said with a smile as she perused the text.

Angela didn't touch anything but the table in front of her, and she made sure it was dust-free before she leaned against it. The whole place gave her the willies; something was out of joint. She could feel it. It was as though someone or something were watching.

"It's a recipe book," Gala said as she leafed through the book.

Angela squirmed and twisted in her seat as she glanced at the book from a distance.

The old house creaked as if moving on its own. Little footsteps padded around behind the girls. Restless dolls in colorful corn-silk capes strolled quietly through the home. The female dolls in the background had begun to dance in the same way as they did in Angela's dream. The male doll with the drums pounded a drumbeat that only the dolls could hear. The female dolls pace forward to the beat of the drums, taking three steps to the left and then swaying to the right and turning around as they raised their arms and lowered them again.

None of the kids saw them. A breathing sound exuded evil, clouding the house with a sweet scent that permeated the whole place and drugged the kids with a false sense of safety and comfort.

The children sat quietly in the house, while the dolls danced in the background. Terry and Hayden kicked back on the sofa in a quiet, unnatural, drugged state, listening to the girls giggle and chat.

After a while, Terry glanced at his watch and said, "We should go now. I have a game in just a little while," He got up and headed for the door. "We can come back later."

As Gala and Terry left, a cold breeze whipped through the front door. Angela shrugged her shoulders and wrapped her arms around herself.

“We’ll catch up with you guys later,” Hayden said.

Hayden started searching through an old stack of magazines. Angela tried not to touch anything.

Heavy footsteps sounded from upstairs, startling the children as well as the dancing dolls. The dolls scattered in all directions. Hayden grabbed a magazine and darted for the front door with Angela on his heels.

As the kids ran away, a disheveled, dirty woman stepped out on the porch and glared after them.

On the way home, clouds formed overhead. The ground outside was still dry. Dust blew up in their faces as they ran. Drops of water sprinkled the ground till it turned to mud.

As they approached the pond, the clouds grew darker and torrential rains swept the area. Lightening streaked overhead, revealing the warrior doll advancing toward them through the foliage.

Hayden fell to his knees. “Oh, my God!” he exclaimed.

Angela looked up and caught a glimpse of the warrior doll as it lunged forward. She grabbed Hayden’s arm and pulled him up.

They dashed toward home fighting the wind and rain with Corky running ahead of them. The splattering of tiny footsteps echoed in the mud behind them.

Angela slipped and fell face down in the mud. Hayden tossed the magazine aside and turned back to help his sister.



The doll dived at Angela's ankle. Corky dived between them, barking fiercely. Hayden pulled Angela to safety.

At home, Corky and the kids slithered through the back door, dripping mud and grunge on Sheila's freshly mopped kitchen floor.

They didn't discuss what had happened. Hayden and Angela stared at each other as if glad for once to be together, but there was little joy in the air.

Their faces reflected a 'calm before the storm' expression: this wasn't something they'd asked for, but it was something they both knew they had to face.

Corky barked furiously at the back door. One glance out the window revealed the warrior doll.

"We're going to have to destroy that little doll," Hayden said.

"How?"

"I'm going to get a shovel and whack its head off."

"Now?" Angela asked.

"Is there a better time?" Hayden said. "You keep an eye on him while I sneak out the front and race to the barn."

"What if he comes in here?"

"Just keep the door closed!" Hayden insisted as he turned to leave, "I'll be right back!"

Hayden slipped out the front door with Corky in close pursuit. The little dog raced around the house and jumped on the doll, knocking it to the ground. Hayden soon appeared with the shovel. "Corky! Get out of the way!" he shouted.

Corky jumped back. The doll greeted Hayden with a stern expression; his icy green eyes were frozen in a wild stare.

Hayden swung the shovel at the doll. The doll flew up on Hayden's shoulders and attempted to stab him with the sword.

"Look out," Angela cried from behind the window. Corky growled fiercely. Hayden bent down, trying to brush the doll off of him, but the doll had a tight grip. Corky lunged after the doll, catching it by the leg and dragging it off of Hayden.

Hayden recovered and slammed the shovel into the doll's arm, causing it to drop the sword. Corky jumped back. The doll got up and started to run away, but Hayden whacked it against the back of its head, knocking it to the ground. He beat the doll with the shovel until the doll didn't move anymore.

Once the doll appeared to be defeated, Angela stepped out on the porch and looked at her brother and Corky.

"Come on, let's bury him."

"Now?" Angela asked. "Can't we wait until after it has stopped raining?"

"No. Let's get rid of this doll forever," Hayden insisted. "Maybe we can find a box to lock him in, then bury him out by the barn."

"Okay."

Hayden took the doll and squished his head in his hand as he carried the doll down to the basement. Angela followed.

As soon as they entered the basement, Hayden tossed the doll aside while he picked out a box. Angela flipped on the lights.

In the meantime the doll's green eyes became lifelike. He stood up and wandered off to hide in the shadow beneath the stairs.

Hayden held up a box, "This one will do."

"No, that's just cardboard. Don't we have something stronger?"

Hayden tossed the first box aside. He emptied a toolbox and asked, "How about this? It has a lock."

"Great, that'll work, but I want to wrap the whole thing in duct tape too," Angela said. She held up a roll of tape that she had found on one of the shelves.

When they went to get the doll, they discovered that he was no longer where he'd been tossed. He'd left little footprints on the dusty floor. Angela screeched at the sight.

Hayden followed them to the doll's hiding place behind the stairs. The doll appeared to be asleep but opened one eye and watched them stealthily while they worked.

Hayden placed him in the box. Suddenly, the doll opened its eyes and glared at Hayden, who jumped back and fell on his tush.

"Quick, Angela, hand me the tape," he insisted. Hayden wrapped the doll's body tightly and twisted the arms and legs in an unnatural position, taping them to its back.

The doll squinted its eyes as if it were in pain. Hayden wrapped a bandage around the doll's eyes as well.

"Look," Angela cried. "One eye is open and the other one closed."

Hayden shoved the doll in the box and slammed it shut. With Hayden holding the freshly boxed doll and Angela carrying the packaging tape, the kids hurried to the barn. Hayden tossed the box aside and dug a fairly deep hole.

When he dropped the box in the hole, the doll fell out on its back, glaring up at them with its perpetual wink. The doll's left arm had sprung free of the tape. Hayden whacked the doll's left arm and head off with the shovel, then placed the doll in the box with its freshly amputated arm and head at one end and its shoulders at the other.

He locked the box this time and wrapped it in tape. They placed the wrapped package deep in the hole, covered it with lots of mud and placed a cement block on top of the burial site.

## Chapter 9

Sheila had left a note on the table promising a speedy return. She'd run to the store for just a minute.

Hayden and Angela changed into dry clothing as quickly as possible and met in the front room.

Corky had wiped himself clean by rolling all over the furniture and carpet. He frolicked around the house, glad to be home.

Sheila came in late with a bag of fried chicken. She surveyed the mud-splattered house with Lynette on her heels. "Nasty," Lynette said. "This is really nasty."

"Looks like you kids got caught out in the rain."

"Oh, Mom. It was awful," Angela said. "We were running home in the rain and this awful doll was chasing us."

“A doll?” Sheila questioned. “Surely, you can come up with something better than that.”

“It’s true.” Hayden said as he picked up a chicken leg. “There was this evil warrior doll chasing us. I had to beat it up with a shovel.” He took a sip of lemonade. “We had to bury it out by the barn.”

Sheila gave them a disgusted look as she sat a plate in front of Lynette and placed some mashed potatoes on it. “I know it rained, and I’ll even concede that perhaps you two couldn’t get home without getting covered in mud, but a doll? Can’t you two tell the truth?”

“We are telling you the truth,” Angela said. “If you don’t believe us, Hayden will go dig up the doll and show it to you.”

Hayden looked at his clean clothes then gave Angela a dirty look, “I’ll what?”

“We can prove it,” Angela said as she reached for a dinner roll. “We have the doll.”

“No, I don’t want you two going out in the rain,” Sheila said. “It’s bad enough that you were out there in the first place. I wouldn’t want you to catch a death of cold to dig up some nasty doll.”

## Chapter 10

As Angela dressed for the game, she thought about how glad she was that this whole ordeal was over. Now that that evil doll was destroyed, no other doll could possibly be that much trouble. Even if the dolls she'd seen the other night were real, she wasn't going to worry about it now. She and Hayden had met the challenge head on and had been victorious. There was no reason to believe that they couldn't do it again, should a confrontation arise.

Angela skipped out of her room, rode the banister down the stairs, and landed in front of her dad. He jumped back in surprise, and they both laughed. Hayden soon joined them at the door.

"Come on kids, we don't want to be late," James said as he headed out the door.

Sheila grabbed her bag, with all Lynette's supplies in it. Hayden took the camera, and Angela took one last glance at herself in her new lime and orange summer short suit and the fancy new bracelet dad had given her.

'I look so good.' She thought and smiled at herself. Her world was back to normal. She skipped out the door adjusting her new bracelet, passing her mother who was on her way back to check on something.

Sheila grimaced as she crawled into the truck. With Hayden sitting in the back, it was still a tight squeeze for the two girls and their parents in the cab. Sheila gave James a couple of twisted glances and finally burst out, "Why, pray tell, did you think it would be a good idea to purchase this rattle-trap of a truck?"

"I told you already," James explained. "It was made the same year I was born. I've always wanted to own a Chevrolet pickup to commemorate the year of my birth. We talked about this years ago."

"That's dumb."

"No, it's not dumb. It's just a passion of mine."

Sheila attempted to adjust Lynette in the seat. "I can't secure her safely in this cab. There aren't enough seat belts."

"It's not far to the ball park," James insisted. "You'll both be safe."

"The money you spent was our money," Sheila sat back and held Lynette on her lap, a sad expression on her face. "You never considered my feelings in the matter."

"But Sweetie, I didn't spend a lot of money," he explained as he turned onto the main road. "Besides, we have plenty of money."



“Don’t ‘but Sweetie’ me. You always do that when you’re wrong,” Sheila continued her argument. “You’re just a big child. You want a toy, and you go buy yourself a toy. You don’t consider me or my feelings at all.”

Angela and Lynette sat quietly, looking back and forth between their parents as they fussed. Angela knew this game had to be better than the game they were about to see.

“Well, I know you love me,” James chuckled. “I would think you’d want me to fulfill all my dreams if you truly do love me,” he paused a minute. “I love you, and I want you to have all your dreams fulfilled. Isn’t that what loving someone is about, wanting the best for that person and helping them fulfill their dreams?”

“Say that again,” Sheila said. She appeared to be in deep thought.

“I know you love me,” James said with a quizzical expression on his face, “And I love you. Isn’t that true?”

“Well, we’ll see,” Sheila retorted. “You said that you want me to have all my dreams fulfilled?”

“Yes,” James whispered.

“So if I just go out and buy whatever I please without discussing it with you, then it won’t matter because you love me so much.”

“Yes, I guess that’s what I’m saying,” James muttered as he looked out the side window.

“Okay, I get it now,” Sheila said as she rolled her eyes toward the ball field.

James thought about what he'd just suggested and wondered how much this truck was really going to cost him. He eyed his wife knowing full well that the repercussions were going to be costly. "What are you wanting to buy?" he asked with a small tremble in his voice.

"You bought an antique vehicle without consulting me. That's a major purchase to the tune of how many dollars?"

James mumbled incomprehensibly.

"I didn't hear you."

"A reasonable amount," James spoke up. "A steal if you ask me."

"Yeah, you were robbed," Sheila laughed. "You deserve to be robbed, but I don't. It'll take a truckload of fulfilled dreams to add up to the price you paid."

James didn't say a word.

After a while Sheila giggled and sang out, "The kids and I are going shopping, and we're not coming back till we've spent a truckload of cash."

James's phone beeped. He struggled to get it out of his pocket and grimaced as he said, "Harrison here . . ." He grunted gruff answers to the worker who called. "No . . . That's not what I ordered . . . It cost too much . . . It won't work . . . Can't this wait till tomorrow? . . . fine!" he shouted and hung up the phone.

They pulled into the parking lot. The kids couldn't wait to get out of the truck and scatter.

Hayden waved at Terry, who was already on the field. Hopping out of the truck, he swung his new camera around his neck and raced to meet Terry and his teammates. The guys started slapping backs and chatting.

Angela adjusted her bracelet and tugged on her shorts as she searched for a familiar face. She spotted Christine in the stands and hurried to join her, glad to know that she was no longer missing.

Sheila and James quietly unloaded their lawn chairs and set them up in a spot not far from the bleachers. Neither one of them spoke. Sheila wore a Mona Lisa smile. James watched her from the corner of his eye. He didn't dare disturb her wickedly busy mind.

Angela couldn't help but notice the coldness of the people in the crowd. As she bounded up the stairs, she became aware of icy stares from people who seemed like vultures. For a minute she backed against the railing and watched the stiff-legged walk of about a third of the crowd. 'How odd,' she thought to herself. These people walk as stiffly as wind-up dolls. She shook her head as if she'd seen some other abnormality that no one else had seen. 'Perhaps this is a part of the madness,' she thought. "God, I hope I'm not going mad," she muttered to herself.

Christine, who was sitting on the bleachers next to her boyfriend, waved at Angela and motioned for her to join them. For a second Angela thought she saw a ray of green light flashing from Christine's eyes, but she quickly dismissed the thought since the sun was in her eyes and she knew that humans couldn't project rays of light from their eyes.

"Who's that?" The young man inquired.

“Nobody,” she replied.

“Who?” he asked.

“Nobody to you,” Christine said as she pushed her long hair behind her ear, revealing a scar-free forehead. “Her name is Angela. She’s a kid who lives down the street.”

“Oh,” he said knowingly, “in the Bradford house.”

Christine nudged him.

Angela dropped her jaw. “What about the Bradford house?”

“It’s a very nice house,” he said as he offered his hand to Angela. “I’m John, John Wheatly.”

“Hi, I’m Angela,” Angela said as she took his hand, “not a nobody.”

“Oh, have a seat, Angela,” Christine suggested, tapping the bleacher beside her with her long fingernails.

Angela sat next to the Christine, who immediately turned her back on her friend and cuddled up next to John.

Angela fidgeted in her seat. She looked off in the distance and saw Gala coming toward the bleachers. Angela jumped up and said, “There’s Gala.” She left Christine and John to themselves and ran to meet Gala.

Off to the right, Gala came running toward the bleachers. “Angela!” She yelled.

Angela waved at Gala and met her at the edge of the bleacher. They hugged, giggled and compared their clothing as they strolled toward an empty spot on the bleachers behind the opposing team.

“Christine’s here,” Angela announced.

“I know,” Gala said as she adjusted her sunglasses. “Dad said she showed up this afternoon.”

“I wonder where she was?”

“Who knows? Nobody knows for sure,” Gala said as she waved at Christine. “Let’s sit over there where we can get a good view of the other team.”

“Great,” Angela agreed. Their main reason for being here was to keep their eyes on the guys from the other team. Neither girl cared about the game.

On the top of the bleachers behind Christine and her boyfriend, a redheaded woman was crawling all over a young blonde-headed man. They were clawing at each other and making quite a scene. Everyone saw them. A few people were whispering about them.

“Gala, I have to tell you something.”

“What?”

“After we left that old house yesterday, we were followed.”

“No!”

“Yes, it was awful. You should have been there.”

“How could you have been followed? There was no one there.”

“I don’t mean you should have been there,” Angela said tapping her friend on her knee. “I mean, it was awful.”

“What happened?”

“Okay. There was this warrior doll there. Did you see it? It was on the shelf.”

“What of it?”

“It chased us home.”

“A doll chased you home?”

“Yes, but it’s okay now. Hayden beat it up with a shovel and chopped its head off.”

“Ha-ha-ha-haw,” Gala laughed out loud. “You’re an idiot. Did you know that? An idiot.”

Angela wanted to run away, but there was no place to go: her parents were probably still fighting, Christine and John were not far away, in the middle of a loving embrace, and the people in this crowd looked especially unfriendly. “We have the doll buried in a box out back. If you want, Hayden could dig it up. Then you’d know I’m not lying.”

“What would that prove? It’s dead?” Gala chortled, “It was never alive in the first place. Did you tell Christine?”

“No, not yet.”

“Let me tell her,” Gala said as she jumped up and rushed over to Christine.

Angela felt more isolated than ever. She cast a glance about the crowd and spied the old man who had warned them about the old house. He was sitting on the front bleacher not far from the scorekeepers. ‘He must know about the dolls coming to life,’ she thought. ‘After all, he did tell us we were making a mistake and warned us not to move out here.’ She wanted him to know it was almost all over now that that warrior doll was bound and buried; those little girl dolls couldn’t be much trouble.

The old man from the real estate office yelled and clapped his hands when Terry's team was doing well.

Angela fidgeted as Gala took the seat next to her again and said, "That's so strange."

"What?" Angela asked.

"Christine, she seemed to believe your story," Gala said.

"We'll duh, it's true."

"She acted like she already knew."

"How could she?"

"I thought she'd laugh and say you were silly, but she didn't," Gala continued.

"I'm not silly!" Angela explained. "I'm right. These dolls do come to life."

Gala crossed her arms and looked back at Christine and then turned to face the front.

After a while Angela pointed at the old man in front of them, "Do you know that old man?"

"Which one?"

"That old man on the front."

"Yeah, he's a little bit flaky," Gala explained. "Dad likes him, though. Says he's a good man. Not too clear upstairs, if you know what I mean, but he's okay."

"He warned us not to move into our house," Angela whispered. "Said there was something evil in our house."

“Ignore it,” Gala said, dismissing the idea with a wave. “He’s old, just old and stupid. I wouldn’t pay any attention to him.”

After the next couple of batters walked, the old man left the area. “Do you suppose,” Gala asked sarcastically, “he’s been followed by the dolls? Maybe he killed one and has it buried somewhere.” Gala snickered.

Angela got up to follow the man. She thought he might make a better ballgame companion than the one she’d chosen.

“Hey, wait up,” Gala yelled. “Wait for me.”

The girls watched the old man as a youngster approached him and asked, “Grandpa, do you have any more of those medals that ward off evil? I lost mine.”

“Yes, of course I do,” The tall, thin black man with white hair peaking out everywhere looked nothing like the little blond-headed-blue-eyed boy who stood in front of him waiting for the gift. The old man dug in his pocket and pulled out a number of icons on strings and handed one to the little boy.

Angela had no idea what kind of a medal could ward off evil, but she was determined to find out and to get her hands on one in spite of what Gala said. She knew that would be hard with Gala watching, and she hoped her friend would go away for just long enough for her to get one of those medals.

Gala took off for the ladies room at the same time the old man headed into the men’s room. “I’ll wait here,” Angela told her friend, “and see when he comes out.”

Angela didn’t want to be seen waiting outside the men’s room. She got as far away from the entrance as she could while keeping a close eye on the door,



hoping the old man would come out and give her one of those charms before Gala returned.

After a while, Hayden took off for the top of the bleachers to get a few more shots from there. He hung out over the top and saw Angela waiting outside the bathroom area.

Flash. He snapped her picture from the top of the bleachers. She turned and saw Hayden standing up there. “What are you doing?” Hayden asked.

“Nothing,” Angela replied.

“Why would you be back here when the game is on the other side?”

“Don’t you have anything you can do without pestering me?” she asked.

“I just think it’s weird that a prissy little girl would be standing outside the men’s room. Following some hunk you’re trying to pick up, are you?” Hayden chuckled.

“Shut up! Hayden! And leave me alone!” Angela shouted. She stomped back to the front of the bleachers, forgetting about Gala and her promise to wait for her.

Hayden returned to his discreet mission. Who knows, someday he might be a photojournalist?

After a while the old man came back and took his seat. Angela moved to the spot next to him and made a more direct approach.

“Hello, my name is Angela.”

“Hello Angela. Enjoying the game?”

“Not really.”

The old man didn't say anything. He just kept watching the game.

After staring at him for a couple of minutes, Angela asked, "What's your name?"

"I'm Ralph, Ralph Carpenter," he said. "Most of the kids just call me Grandpa."

"Grandpa? Well Grandpa, I heard you had a pocket full of good luck charms. Is it true?" Angela looked inquisitively into his eyes.

Somewhat disturbed at the suggestion he answered, "No, absolutely not."

"But I saw them in your hand," she explained, holding her hand before her the way he did a few minutes ago.

"You said you heard I had them, and now you say you saw them. Which is it?" he chuckled. "Did you see them, or did you hear about them?"

Angela's face flushed. "Never mind," she said. She wanted to run away and did.

The old man followed her.

There was a commotion at the back of the bleachers. Someone had fallen off. A girl screamed. A bunch of people rushed to the area.

"Little girl, come back here," Grandpa called. Angela rushed away even faster and ran to her mother's side.

The old man stepped up to Sheila and James, who'd found a nice couple, Gala's parents, to visit with.

"The little girl and I were having a nice chat," Ralph explained. "She ran away from me,"

He turned to Angela and spoke directly to her. "I didn't mean to run you off little lady, but I want to give you one of these St. Benedict medals that I keep in my pocket." He pulled out a whole handful of them, and let Angela pick the one she wanted.

"Now, this is not a lucky charm." Ralph insisted. "It's a St. Benedict medal. Many people wear them to ward off evil, but it's a religious relic to remind you to follow God's teachings."

He turned to address James and Sheila: "You can each have one. I have plenty. Everyone should wear a relic."

"No," James said. "My wife and I aren't religious people, but we don't mind if the kids have them."

"Lynette can have one," Sheila said and sat her youngest daughter on her lap so Ralph could place the amulet around her neck.

Ralph finally recognized James. "Oh, I see now. You're the family that's renting the Bradford house. I told you about that old house, but you didn't listen. Now, your daughter must be having some problems with the demons that are out there."

"No," James said. "I don't think so."

"Why else would she come to me asking for a good luck charm?" Ralph asked.

James looked at Angela inquisitively and said, "I don't know. We haven't had any trouble."

"Is that true missy?" Ralph asked Angela.

Angela didn't answer.

"I see. Hum" Ralph mused as he placed the relics in his pocket and pulled a card out of his shirt pocket for James. "Well, when you do, you give me a call."

"I don't think that'll be necessary," James insisted, but he took the card anyway.

"Well, enjoy the game," Ralph said and walked away.

A concession stand worker summoned James, Sheila and Gala's parents to come to the back of the bleachers.

## Chapter 11

“Look, Hayden’s fine,” James said as he started the truck. “They’re going to put a cast on his arm and tell him to keep it in the sling. We’ll be home in a couple of hours.”

“You let him go to the hospital with those people?”

“They’re our neighbors,” James insisted. “I’m going to meet them there in just a few minutes.

“They’re strangers to us. How can you trust them with our son like that?” Sheila asked.

“I do know the man. We worked together a few years ago, when I was on the force. It was before I met you,” James explained. He’s an all right sort of guy.

This isn't exactly unfamiliar stomping ground for me. And besides, they had to take their daughter there as well."

"You've been making a lot of decisions lately that don't make a lot of sense to me," Sheila shook her head as she tried to secure Lynette in her seat.

James whispered, "Apparently."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

James looked at his wife as if he'd never seen this woman before.

"Hayden should never have been on top of those bleachers," Sheila said as she pulled out a cigarette and placed it between her lips, "How did he fall? Did he explain that?"

"The woman I married doesn't smoke," James said. "Who are you?"

"What was he doing?" Sheila asked.

James gave up the fight and simply stated, "He was just trying to take a few pictures."

"So it's your fault."

"What?"

"You're the one who bought him the camera," Sheila snapped.

"What has gotten into you? You've never been cranky like this before."

"Cranky?" Sheila barked.

"I didn't mean that," James said apologetically, shaking his head in disgust.

"What did you mean?"

James spoke very softly in an attempt to mollify Sheila, “Now, all of a sudden, it’s like I don’t know who I’m married to anymore.” James pulled up to the house. The girls hopped out of the truck and headed for the door.

Sheila and James argued for several minutes. Finally, Sheila got out, slammed the door, and headed for the house as well.

Lynette ran toward her mother and clutched her tighter than ever as she opened the door. Angela came strolling in behind.

Corky greeted them as cheerfully as ever. Angela ignored the dog and headed for her room.

“Do you mind if Lynette sleeps with you tonight?” Sheila called out as Angela bounded up the stairs. “She seems so upset and doesn’t want to go to her room. I think she’s afraid to sleep alone.”

“Yes, I mind,” Angela muttered softly, careful not to let her mother hear. It wouldn’t do to contradict her now. She turned toward her mom and said, “She can stay as long as she doesn’t wet the bed.”

Angela went in her room and thought about what a strange day this had been. They had buried the doll early in the morning. Then her parents had had a major fight, Christine had said she was a ‘nobody,’ and now she was stuck with Lynette for God only knows what reason. She prepared for bed, and snuggled under the covers with Corky at her feet.

Lynette burst through the door with her teddy bear tucked under her arm. She snuggled up next to Lynette and hugged her sister, placing a big wet one on her

cheek. "I love you Angela," she said as she caressed her idol, her role model, her best friend.

Angela lay there thinking about how sweet Lynette could be sometimes. It was hard to hate such a sweet little sister. She'd never really hated her at all. It's just that she always liked her best when she was asleep or in some other room. Sometimes Angela had really enjoyed the company when she still wanted to play with dolls, but she was way too old for dolls now. She and Lynette had little in common.

Angela would never admit it, but she really didn't want to be alone tonight, especially after listening to her parents fight. They'd never argued so much before. Something was out of sync here in this house, but she didn't know why. This creepy house and all its strange noises gave her the willies. Lynette's presence was a comfort to Angela, though she dared not admit it.

Angela fell asleep quickly after her long day and was still asleep when her mother came into the room and said, "Your father just called. The truck broke down, and they're waiting for a wrecker half a mile from here."

Corky stretched and hopped out of bed.

"Hayden is in a lot of pain. I told James he could wait, but I'm picking up Hayden, so he won't have to suffer alone anymore."

"I don't want to go anywhere, Mom, I'm sleepy," Angela answered.

"It's not far. I won't be gone but just a few minutes."

Corky shook himself, stretched and wagged his tail.



“I’m going to let Corky out while I’m gone. You and Lynette will be safe here. Don’t worry. I’ll be back in a flash.” Sheila said.

Angela dozed off again as her mother was pulling out of the driveway. A couple of minutes later, Lynette snuggled up against her big sister. Angela ignored her until she heard Lynette yell. “Go away! Go away bad doll! You very bad doll, go!”

Lynette crawled so close to Angela that she nearly pushed her sister out of bed.

Angela opened her eyes wide. “Get away from me, you bad doll!” Lynette yelled and with one more shove, Angela tumbled out on the floor.

Angela sat up with a start. There at her foot was a little doll standing with its hands on its hips.

Lynette tossed a pillow at the doll. Angela reached for the lamp and hurled it at the doll. No other dolls were in sight. “Lynette, you stay here,” Angela said and eased closer to the doll. Lynette clung to her sister’s nightshirt with one hand and her teddy bear with the other. Angela snatched the lamp and crept forward. The doll backed away for a couple of steps then suddenly dived for the door.

Lynette yelled, “She was with that other doll!”

“What other doll?”

“That big doll with eyes, eyes like yours, eyes like mine,” she said as she touched Angela’s cheek and then pointed to her eyes. Then she touched her own eyelid. “She comes to my room at night and scares me.”

Angela hugged Lynette and thought, ‘She’s seen the same doll that I’ve seen. Oh, my God. It’s real. She’s in danger. I’m in danger still. What can I do? She’s just a baby. How can I protect my little sister? Who is going to protect me?’ Tears rolled down her cheeks.

The girls headed downstairs hand in hand, with Lynette still clutching her favorite teddy bear. Angela flipped on every light on the way. She poured them each a glass of milk.

At three-thirty, Sheila, James and Hayden approached the door and saw the girls still up. Sheila said, “I’m going to bed, James. It’s your turn to be a grown-up now,” and stomped up the staircase.

James strolled into the kitchen and took a chair across from his daughters. Lynette immediately crawled in his lap.

James looked inquisitively at Angela. “What keeps you two up?” he asked.

Before Angela could open her mouth Lynette said, “There’s a doll, a very bad doll that walks in this house.”

James set Lynette on the table and looked directly at her, “Oh, and what about this doll?” he asked.

“She comes to see me.” Lynette shook her head and mumbled, “and I don’t want her to.”

Hayden stepped into the doorway holding his fresh new sling with his right hand.

James addressed Angela, “I thought she was going to sleep with you tonight.”

“She has eyes, eyes like yours, eyes like mine,” Lynette said, pointing first to his eyes and then to her own eyes.

“She is telling you the truth, you know,” Angela agreed as she drank the last of the milk.

James lifted Lynette into his arms, hugged her, and asked, “My God. What is going on here?”

Hayden stepped up to the table and sat in one of the chairs, “Terry told us this place was haunted,” he said.

“It’s not haunted,” James insisted. “Some peculiar things are happening around here, but there’s no such thing as a ghost.”

“But they are alive.” Angela continued. “The dolls in this house are alive. They’ve been frightening me for a while now,” she stopped and pointed at Hayden. “Hayden saw one too, the other day. He chopped off its left arm right about here,” Angela said as she touched his arm at the broken spot. She looked Hayden in the eye, remembering that he had chopped off the doll’s head as well. “We buried that one in the barn.”

Hayden nodded in agreement.

“But now,” Angela continued, “Now, there are others. What are we going to do?”

“All right kids, that’s enough,” James said as he stood up holding Lynette in one arm and patting her back with the other. “We’ll search the house to see if we can locate anything out of the ordinary.”

James led the way, with Lynette over his shoulder and the other two following him. They searched every nook and cranny, but found nothing out of place. The dolls in the attic appeared to be in the same locations as they had been the other day. Finally, James said, "I will have to figure out a way to solve this problem. If anything else goes wrong, call me."

"Until then?" Angela asked

"Until then get some sleep," James said. "I'll walk you back to your room."

He carried Lynette upstairs and searched the room once more but didn't see anything. "All clear now. See you girls in the morning."

James had become more worried about his family, not so much about the doll he hadn't seen as about Sheila's sudden change in personality and demeanor. Sheila had never reacted so violently against anything he had done before. Something was definitely wrong with her.

Now that all three of the kids had started to see living dolls, he'd begun questioning his decision to spend the summer here. He decided this would be a great night to experience life on the sofa. Before the night was over, he got up and toured the house several times, searching for something, anything, but finding nothing.

By the time the sun came up, he was stretched out on the porch swing, sound asleep. Sheila had gotten up hours ago and didn't care that her husband was late for work and still asleep on the porch.

## Chapter 12

“Gala, wait up,” Angela called as she rushed to meet her new friend, who was headed toward the pond with a quilt over her arm. “You won’t believe what happened.”

“I already know,” Gala said. “You stood me up last night.”

“Sorry about that. I had to follow the old man.”

“You could have waited. We could have found him together,” Gala stopped and spread her quilt on the ground.

“Something awful happened last night.”

Gala took her seat on the quilt, “Yeah, Hayden fell off the bleacher and whacked me on the shoulder on the way down.” She pulled back her sleeve to show off her new bruise.

“I know. But something else happened, too.”

“He broke his arm looking at that naked woman.”

“What?” Angela asked as she formed a shocked expression. This was the first time she’d heard this version. She knew her brother had his faults and had whacked Gala on the shoulder when he fell, but she’d never known him to be a pervert.

“Terry told me. He said that Hayden was supposed to be taking pictures of the team, but he was up on the bleachers taking picture of that nearly naked woman instead.”

“Oh! I see,” Angela said. Though somewhat disturbed by these unexpected accusations, she had more important issues to discuss. She took her seat across from Gala and continued to speak, “Never mind about that. I have to tell you about last night after we got home.”

“What happened?”

“Some doll came to life in my room.”

Gala widened her eyes and leaned forward, “What?”

“It’s true.” Angela took her friend by her shoulders and looked directly into her eyes, “You’ve got to believe me. One of the little dolls in the house was in my room last night. She had eyes, real human eyes. Not some sort of thread or glass eyes but real eyes.”

Gala pulled away, “You must have dreamed it.”

“No, Lynette saw it too. She woke me up yelling at one of them. I got up, and there she was standing on the edge of the bed.”

“Lynette?”

“No,” Angela explained rushing her words and gesturing with her hands. “The doll was standing at the edge of the bed. Lynette was screaming at this doll; she said, ‘Go away you doll, you very bad doll.’ So I jumped up, and there she was at the foot of my bed. Her eyes were wide open. She was moving around. She was alive. Alive!”

Gala rolled over on the ground with a belly laugh. When she finally settled down she asked, “Tell, me, did this doll give you the evil eye?”

“You’re making fun of me,” Angela’s said as her face dropped. She thought about the question for a moment and answered, “I guess there’s no other type of look that a living doll can give now, is there? It was scary all right, and I was plenty spooked. So was Lynette.”

“Did anyone else see it?” Gala asked.

“No, Mom was gone. Hayden and Dad weren’t back from the hospital yet,” Angela wondered what it would take to convince her friend.

“So no one has witnessed this except you and a four-year-old.”

“Forget it! You’re not my friend. I don’t know why I’m telling you this,” Angela wandered over to the edge of the pond.

Gala kept to herself on the pallet, ignoring Angela.

Terry showed up next. Angela was standing by the pond tossing in tree twigs when Terry came up to her. “Hayden told me about last night,” he said.

“It’s true, you know. Lynette did see the doll.” Angela mimicked Lynette, “It had, ‘eyes like yours, and eyes like mine.’”

“That’s a pretty strange story, but I believe almost anything about that old house.”

“Why?”

“There’s just too many stories floating around about that place,” Terry said. “You and Lynette aren’t the only ones to see those dolls come to life.”

“There’s something you’re not telling me,” Angela looked at Terry in amazement. “Have you seen them?”

“No! I haven’t, but my grandfather has told me some stories that are pretty far out,” Terry picked up a long stick and started breaking the dead limbs off of it.

“What kind of stories? Doll stories?” Angela inquired with great interest.

“About when he was a kid and later when my dad was just a baby,” Terry continued as he tore away the last few limbs. “We’ve all heard these stories before. They say that there is evil in every doll. Since all dolls are formed after the image of human beings, they want to become human. The only thing that is stopping them is the breath of God. They can’t get it. So they take the next best thing. They suck away the souls of the humans. What they leave behind is the shell of the human, the human part, the evil part. All the humanity, all the feelings, all the caring and concern is transferred to the doll body. The evil from the dolls is transferred to the human shell.

“What happens to the human soul in the doll body?”

“It doesn’t die,” Terry said as he tossed a small clump of dirt in the pond. “The human part remains in the doll.”

“For how long?”



“I don’t know, a lifetime, forever. Who knows?”

“Is there any way to get the soul transferred back into a person’s own body?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never heard of it. Grandpa says that the body goes on as normal living a stolen life, a corrupted life, causing pain and suffering along the way.”

“That’s terrible.”

“Yes, terrible, but true. Most people just laugh and call it nonsense, but when the Bradfords died, the stories surfaced again.”

“Why?”

“When they died they were surrounded by dolls. They hadn’t been sick at all,” Terry explained as he walked along beside the pond, pounding the stick along the way. “Mrs. Bradford was scheduled to run in a senior citizens race she’d been training for. She wasn’t sick, and neither was her husband. He’d been a weight trainer all his life. It was those dolls, those damn dolls.”

“I thought you said that the dolls took over people’s bodies and left the dolls behind holding the person’s soul.”

“I did.”

“But the Bradfords are dead.”

“The Bradfords fought the dolls and lost. The only way to survive an attack is to destroy the doll,” Terry said as he strolled toward the pond. “The dolls are the essence of evil. They kill because they can.”

“Did Hayden tell you about the one we buried?”

“No, he didn’t mention it.”

“It chased us home from that old house. We buried a doll by the barn.”

“No,” Terry ran his hand through his hair.

Hayden strolled up. “Hi,” he said as he adjusted the sling around his neck.

“I was telling him about the doll.”

“Okay, go on,” Hayden said.

“Hayden chopped off the doll’s arm in the exact same place that he broke his arm,” Angela explained.

“Is that so?” Terry asked as he looked quizzically at Hayden.

Hayden nodded.

“That’s not all,” Angela continued. “He chopped off the dolls head as well, so you know what that means.”

Both boys looked directly at Angela while Hayden massaged his neck with his one free arm.

“Your neck is next!” Angela said as she pointed her finger at his throat.

“This is bad, very bad,” Terry said as he shook his head and looked mournfully at Hayden. “These are truly the last days of you life, man, the very last.”

“Ah, come on man, lighten up. The doll is dead and buried.”

“No, Hayden, they’re never dead,” Terry said. “I mean there’s only two ways you can truly kill the dolls. First you can burn the dolls. But that will only take care of the dolls that are burned.”

“What’s the other way?” Hayden asked.

“The only way to free yourself from ever being attacked again is to separate the doll from the one part of its body that is human.”

“They have a human body part?” Hayden asked

“Yes, They have eyes, don’t they? When you are attacked again, you are going to have to do something that is totally against your nature. You won’t like it. It won’t be easy, but if you do it, the dolls will never be able to harm you.”

“I’ll do it,” Angela said.

“You don’t know what it is yet.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll do anything to save myself from them. I want to keep my humanity, my soul. I don’t want to lose it to some freakin’ doll.”

“It will take a lot of courage.”

“Courage? I believe I can find enough courage to save myself.”

“Can you?”

“I’ve got to,” Angela insisted. “There’s no other way.”

“Poke out their eyes.”

“What?”

“You’ve got to do it. Poke out their eyes.”

“With what?”

“Anything. Your hands if necessary.”

Angela cocked her head to one side and asked, “How can you be sure of this?”

“My Grandfather told me. He said he did it when he was a boy. He said it was the best way to solve the problem.”

Angela dropped her jaw, looked at Hayden and asked, “What do you think?”

He only shrugged his shoulders.

Terry continued, “If you poke out their eyes, you destroy the only a part of them that appears to be human. If you take away their only human part, the doll becomes a normal doll again and can’t harm anyone.”

“But there are lots of dolls,” Angela asked. “If I were to poke out the eyes of one doll, wouldn’t the other dolls attack?”

“No, that would mark you as forever untouchable.”

“Then they’d leave me alone?”

“Yes, forever.”

“I’ll do it.”

“It’s a bloody job.”

“Bloody?”

“Grandpa said that when he did it blood spurted everywhere.”

Angela cringed and took a step backward.

Terry touched Angela’s shoulder. She turned around as he continued the instructions. “If you poke out one of the doll’s eyes, the rest of the dolls will flee in fear. They don’t like the sight of their comrade’s eyes being destroyed. If you can do that, they can’t take you. You will be free of them. They will leave you alone. Can you do it?”

Angela turned her back on Terry and looked at the pond. “That’s it? Poke out the eyes?” she muttered. “That’s the only way.”

“The Bradfords failed because they were too nice. When you poke out one eye, you must poke out the other as well. If you only manage to poke out one of the eyes, the dolls will kill you for certain.”

Hayden gulped, “So what you’re saying is that if you start this project and faint, they’ve got you.”

“Yes.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to give in to them?” Hayden asked. “At least then, you’d still be alive?”

“Alive? Yes, but tainted. Mrs. Bradford had asthma. Grandpa said that he believed that after she poked out the first eye, she had an asthma attack and was unable to poke out the other.”

“And Mr. Bradford?” Angela inquired.

“He was holding an asthma inhaler in his hand. Grandpa said they’d loved each other since grammar school. He believes that he saw his wife losing the battle and brought the inhaler. When he saw that his wife was unable to recover sufficiently to rip out the doll’s other eye, he had a stroke.”

“That’s awful.”

“Grandpa said it was entirely too much for the old man. They’d been married for fifty-five years.”

“That’s sad,” Angela said as she looked at Hayden. “What about our doll?”

“Well, if that doll is still alive,” Hayden continued, “he’s wrapped mighty tight in duct tape and jam-packed in a tool box two feet under tightly-packed mud.”

“And covered with a rock,” Angela added.

“Let’s have a look,” Terry said. “Come on, I’ll dig him up.”

The kids took off toward the barn. Corky followed until they were almost there, then ran off into a copse barking. Angela pointed at the spot. Terry moved the rock. Angela used it as a seat while Hayden retrieved the shovel. Terry dug into the moist ground and pulled up the box, still wrapped in duct tape.

“See,” Angela said. “It hasn’t been touched. It’s just like we left it.”

“Well, we’ll see,” Terry said as he pulled out his knife and sliced through the tape.

“No, it can’t be!” Hayden exclaimed.

Terry held the empty box up for Angela to see.

She gasped. Corky came running toward them. In his mouth, he held the warrior doll that was still partially wrapped in the duct tape. His eyes were still frozen in a perpetual wink in spite of their humanlike quality.

Angela remembered the evil little dolls of all kinds that pranced through her dreams. She remembered seeing this one there leading the others. No matter what, she hated dolls now more than ever. If possible, she would leave this horrible place with all of its madness and never return.

Corky turned the doll loose for just a second. The doll immediately got up and ran off through the trees. Corky raced after him. Angela called him back, but Corky didn’t come. Finally, Angela saw the doll standing on a low branch kicking the dog.

Angela yelled for Corky to come back, but the dog ignored her as usual. Suddenly, Corky grabbed the doll’s ankle and dragged him down, shaking him as if

she were an ordinary toy. He bounced the dolls head against a rock, cracking it down the center.

Angela had no intention of coming near the creature the dog had in his mouth, so she sprinted toward the house.

Corky followed close behind her with the doll in his mouth. Terry chased the dog with the shovel, waiting for him to put the doll down again. When Corky finally released the doll, Terry took a couple of whacks at the doll. The last blow sent the doll flying toward the back porch with his head split open.

Sheila, totally unaware of what was happening, stepped out on the porch in time to see the doll land at the bottom of the steps. She hurried down and picked him up, took a good look at his injuries and his dirt-covered body and tossed him in the trash.

### Chapter 13

Sheila stood on the porch and watched as Hayden, Angela and Terry raced in the back door. “About time you came back to the house,” she snapped. “What have you been up to? You took off without even speaking to me about it. I just don’t know what’s got into you two these days.” The door slammed shut.

“Everything’s changed since we came out here, everything! Here I am talking to myself. I don’t do that. Yikes! I’ve got to get out of here for a while,” she said as she lit another cigarette.

“Listen,” Sheila said as she stepped through the back door, “I have some errands to run in town, and I want to know if you three would like to go to a movie this afternoon while I’m at the beauty salon.”

“No!” Angela said. “There’s too much at stake. We can’t leave.”



“What are you talking about?” Sheila asked as she took another drag from the cigarette. “It’ll be great fun,” Sheila assured them. She strolled over to Hayden and kissed his forehead, “You didn’t take anything for pain before you left. Why don’t you take something now?”

Angela rushed up to her mother and said, “Mom, I don’t know how to tell you this, but the dolls in this house are alive.”

“Angela we’ve been over this before. They’re just dolls, damn dolls.”

“Yeah, well those damn dolls are damn dangerous,” Hayden said.

“Watch your mouth son.”

“Mom, we can’t leave just now. We have to do something about those dolls.”

“I thought you wanted to get away from here, to go home, to go anywhere to get away from the dolls. If the dolls are giving you trouble, then a trip to town would keep you out of that trouble for a while, so you’d better just get it in your head to go with me.”

Angela stepped back toward the boys and turned to face Sheila, “Or what?”

“Or stay here and face the dolls on your own because I’m going to town.”

Terry took a look outside then turned his attention to Sheila, who’d grabbed her purse in one hand and Lynette in the other. She paused at the door and asked one last time, “Are you sure you don’t want to go to a movie?”

“No, Mom,” Angela protested

Sheila took another puff of her cigarette. She wasn't sure how to interpret the kids' behavior. They'd been more secretive than usual. They were up to something, but she had no idea what.

"Mom, we were just outside battling a little doll," Angela said before she stretched her hand into the air and squealed, "Corky's still out there!" She raced to the door and looked out. "Oh, no!" She turned and ran back toward her mother. "The doll could attack Corky! We've got to get him in here. He isn't safe outside."

Sheila exhaled a puff of smoke above their heads and looked directly into Angela's eyes. "Nonsense!" She turned and walked toward the door. "I won't be going crazy over some hocus-pocus mumbo-jumbo, kids. Look, I know you're having a lot of fun trying to stir up something out of nothing. It's understandable. We're out here in the middle of nowhere with nothing to do. You're having your fun, but don't expect me to be dragged into your funhouse."

"But that's just it, mom," Angela insisted. "You're already in it. The house we're living in is a house of horrors whether you believe it or not."

"I'm not going to hear any more of this," Sheila said as she grabbed for the doorknob. "If you don't want to go with me into town, fine, but I expect you to stay out of trouble while I'm away. Got that?"

Angela dropped down on the sofa and pulled her knees up to her chest.

Sheila took a couple of steps closer to the kids. "If you're going to stay here, stay inside."

"But mom," Hayden complained. "We haven't done anything wrong."

“If you think Corky is in trouble outside,” Sheila said as she blew more smoke their way. “I’d better not come home and find out you’ve been out there too.”

Hayden sat down not far away from Angela as Sheila strolled out the door, mumbling. “Hmph, trouble? I’ll give them trouble . . .”

While Sheila and Lynette were gone, Angela, Hayden and Terry watched DVD’s. They picked old familiar movies. None of them paid much attention, and only occasionally did they get caught up in the movie. When Sheila pulled up in the drive, Angela raced out to hug her mom.

Before Sheila unbuckled the sleeping toddler in the back seat, she asked, “Why don’t you help me unload the car while I carry Lynette in?”

Hayden and Terry came out to help. Sheila carried Lynette to the house. She stopped at the front door and looked back, “Hayden, open the door, please,” she said as she cradled Lynette in her arms.

Dutifully, Hayden opened the door for Sheila, who stepped through the threshold and gingerly placed Lynette on the sofa.

The kids unloaded bag after bag of new clothing and linens, for the van was packed full. They’d never known a time when Sheila had ever bought so many things before. When Hayden returned to the van, he looked at Angela and said, “Look at all this stuff.”

“So, what of it?”

“We’re only staying here for the summer. Why did Mom buy all this?”

Angela shrugged. After a few minutes Angela noticed the absence of someone she loved, someone who loved her. She searched the yard, but no one came running toward her. "Where's Corky?" she asked.

The boys stopped and looked at her. They started looking around for the dog, but he was not there.

Within seconds, they heard Corky whimpering out in the barn. They rushed to see what was wrong. Angela shrieked and covered her face with her hands. Her pace slowed the minute she saw what had happened. Hayden and Terry got there a few seconds later. Corky's body hung from a rafter. Sheila heard the scream and rushed to meet them. "My God," she exclaimed. "Oh, my God."

Blood dripped from the dog's freshly cracked skull. His head had been cracked in precisely the same place that the doll's head had been cracked. His body twitched and jerked as life took its leave.

Tears flooded down the faces of the three family members as they gazed at the sight. Terry cocked his head and strolled up to the dog. He sliced the rope and carefully carried the dog to a grassy area.

"Who would do this to Corky?" Sheila asked.

"The dolls got him, mom," Angela answered.

"Do you expect me to believe that Corky was killed by a doll?" Sheila asked incredulously.

Angela turned to Terry and said, "Tell her Terry. Tell her how they come and rob little children of their souls. Tell her how destructive these soul-sucking dolls are, how they kill and destroy."

Sheila appeared suddenly shaken. "My baby," she muttered as she ran toward the house. "Not my baby."

## Chapter 14

There Lynette was lying flat on her back, just as her mother had left her.

“I’m going to call the police,” Sheila said.

“Isn’t it a little late,” Terry suggested. “The dog’s already dead.”

“There was no need to call them before.” Sheila snapped, “Besides, someone has been at our home and God only knows, maybe they’re still here.”

“What can the police do?” Terry asked.

“They’re going to listen to me!” Sheila yelled as she dialed 911.

“I wish someone had listened to me!” Angela muttered. “At least then, Corky would still be alive.”

Sheila’s rolled her eyes to the side and looked at her daughter. She started to say something, but stopped suddenly to respond to the 911 operator.

“Angela,” Hayden said. “There’s no way to know if Corky could have been saved or not.”

“She wouldn’t listen to me,” Angela cried. “She never does.”

“Hayden’s right,” Terry said. “Corky could have been murdered right before our eyes. We might not have been able to prevent it.”

Hayden put his unbroken arm around sister. “It’s not Mom’s fault. She didn’t know.”

Lynette woke up and sat on the side of the sofa. She looked around the room, then went to the door and looked out. As Sheila hung up the phone, Lynette tugged on her mother’s pants and asked, “Where’s Corky?”

“I’ll go dig a hole at the pond,” Hayden said.

“With a broken arm?” Angela asked.

“It’ll be easier than listening to this,” he said.

Lynette pleaded, “Where’s Corky?”

Sheila ran her fingers through her freshly styled hair and sat on the sofa. Lynette crawled upon her mother’s lap.

“Wait up, Hayden,” Angela said. “I’ll help.”

“Me too,” Terry said as he hurried toward the door.

When the police officer arrived, Sheila told him about coming home and finding the dog murdered. She took him out to where the little dog lay.

He looked around for a while then took out a pad and started writing.

Sheila asked, “What is the policy in these matters?”

“First, I take a report and look for evidence.”

Lynette came up to the officer and said, "It was the doll. That doll did it."

"Come again?" The officer said as he stopped to look at the little girl.

"Dolls are coming to life. They did it. I know they did."

Sheila rolled her eyes then pointed toward the porch. "Honey, why don't you go play on the porch while I tend to this?"

Lynette clung to her mother's leg. Sheila pulled her away and pointed at the porch, "Go play." Lynette slowly headed for the porch, looking back at her mother and the officer all the while. Sheila turned her attention to the officer once again.

"If there's a doll involved," the officer said as he gazed out on the horizon, "and it is still moving or can be positively identified," he stopped and turned his eyes toward Sheila, "We burn it."

Sheila dropped her jaw and kept her hands on her hips, "You can't be serious."

The officer looked at Sheila's bewildered face and immediately returned his gaze to the pad in front of him.

"You burn the dolls?" Sheila asked. He ignored her and continued to write as Sheila pressed further, "How can that help?"

The officer shrugged his shoulders and looked away.

"You can't be serious," Sheila said as she paced away from him. "Dolls don't kill. Humans do." She turned and stepped toward the officer.



The officer walked out toward the barn to have a look around. Sheila stayed right on his heels, “But surely, you don’t believe that a doll did this?” she said.

The officer stopped and looked at Sheila with his mouth wide open as he rolled his tongue into his cheek. He shook his head, looked out over the field and walked away.

Sheila followed after him. “Well, fine, let’s just burn all the dolls,” Sheila snapped.

The officer stopped and looked her in the eye, “No lady, no, I’m not suggesting that.”

“Why not?” she continued, “Let’s just get rid of the problem by getting rid of all the dolls.”

“That’s your call lady, not mine,” he said. He looked up to the sky, bit his lip, “They’re just dolls,” he said as he held his pad in front of him, “You said it yourself. Dolls don’t kill. Humans do.” He opened the door to the cruiser and stepped in.

Sheila looked at the trashcan where she’d tossed the doll earlier. She casually lit another cigarette and puffed as she watched the police cruiser pull out of the drive. ‘Could he be right?’ she wondered, ‘Were the kids right as well? Why take a chance?’ Instead of stomping the cigarette out, she squirted some lighter fluid in the trashcan and tossed the stub of her lit cigarette inside.

Sheila rushed inside the house, grabbed a laundry basket, and hurried around the house gathering up a bunch of dolls. She carried them outside and dumped them in the fire.

“Mom! You’re really doing it. You’re burning the dolls.”

“Want to help?”

A squeaking squeal sound erupted from the fire. Both Lynette and Sheila jumped back horrified.

“They’re squealing!”

“Yes,” Sheila acknowledged. “We must be doing something right. She grabbed Lynette by the hand and hurried back into the house to retrieve more dolls for the flame. Sheila raced out the back door and tossed another load of dolls on the flames.

Lynette grabbed her mother’s leg and held on. “Don’t leave me Mommy. Don’t.”

Sheila bent down and hugged her daughter. “I won’t.” She picked up Lynette and cradled her in her arms. “Come on, now, we’ve got to get the rest of the dolls.”

As she opened the screen door, a warrior doll lunged at her, knocking her down. He was followed by a wild group of dolls attacking both of them. Sheila struggled to free herself, while Lynette raced around the yard screaming and crying. Sheila raced toward Lynette, snatched her up in her arms and started running with her. The dolls followed.

Finally, as she came to the top of a hill, she couldn't see or hear any of the dolls. She looked back and found that there was nothing out there at all. She held her daughter and cried as she crept back toward the Entourage. Lynette was still whimpering as her mother placed her in the car.

Sheila knew the kids had to get out of there. She climbed in the front and started blowing the horn. As the kids came back toward the house, they raced toward the van. Sheila waited until she saw Angela and Hayden coming, then jumped out of the van and rushed to greet the kids. "Oh my babies, my poor babies. Come on kids, we're leaving this house. Get in quick."

Sheila fumbled for the extra key she usually kept hidden in the glove compartment, but it wasn't there. She crawled out and reached under the van trying to find the other spare key she had hidden there in a magnetic key box, but it, too, was gone. She looked at all three of the kids and said, "I've got to go in and get my purse. I'll just be a minute."

"I'll go with you." Terry insisted. They approached the house with caution. Sheila opened the front door and looked around but didn't see any dolls. Her purse sat wide open on an end table in the front room. She hurried toward it, grabbed the purse and turned to leave the room. A warrior doll carrying a sword stepped between Sheila and Terry. He stabbed at Sheila's legs. Sheila kicked him into the wall and darted passed him out the door with Terry running along beside her. They dived into the van and started off down the road.

At the end of the driveway, a large doll jumped out of the bushes and onto the windshield. Sheila peeled out and swerved to shake the Entourage free of the

creature, but it held fast. She speeded up till she reached an intersection where she the drove in a circle as fast as she could and slung the creature off the windshield.

It tumbled head over heel off onto the ground. Sheila slammed on the brakes, backed up and drove over it, then took off toward the other way. By the time they got to the end of the road, Sheila slammed on the brakes again. “What was that thing?” she asked.

“It didn’t look like a doll to me,” Angela said.

A horrified look swept across Sheila’s face, “Was it a child?”

Terry stretched his neck to look back. “It was a boy, a young boy,” he pointed out the window. “Look!”

They all looked back as a boy got up and ran out into the bushes.

Sheila tremble all over, “I ran over a child?” She raised her hands to her face. Tears spurted out as she exclaimed, “Oh my god, he wasn’t a doll. I’ve run over a kid! On purpose!” Sheila leaped out of the van and headed toward the child, who was still hiding in the bushes.

“Mom!” Angela squealed, but her mother didn’t listen. Angela, Hayden and Terry hopped out of the Entourage and followed Sheila, who’d disappeared into the bushes.

The boy left the bushes and ran off down the street. “He’s not your typical everyday sort boy,” Angela said as she looked back at the intersection where he’d been. “If he were a true human, he’d still be lying in the street, unable to recover. There’s no way he could have run away after being run over if he were an ordinary human.”

She slowed her pace and glanced in Terry's direction. "I can't believe what just happened."

"Neither can I," Terry said.

Angela said, "He's one of them, a doll in human form."

"He got up and ran away. He's must be okay," Hayden said.

"Why did he come out of nowhere and jump on the car?" Angela asked.

"Maybe his soul was trapped in one of those dolls that was being burned," Terry suggested. "And he could sense it was in danger."

"So you think that mom may have destroyed a human soul by burning the dolls?" Angela asked as she cautiously headed to the clump of trees where Sheila was standing.

"I don't know." Terry said.

Sheila stepped away from the bushes, squatted down, placing her hands on her knees, "I'm not going to drive anymore. I just can't."

"Mom." Hayden exclaimed as he approached his mother. "Are you all right?"

"I can't drive. Not now, anyway." Sheila pulled herself up and said, "Get Lynette."

Angela went back to the car and retrieve Lynette, who'd managed to crawl half-way out already.

Lynette ran toward her mom crying, "Mommy! Mommy!"

Sheila embraced her daughter as soon as she came near.

The three older kids watched as Sheila took Lynette's hand and said, "Come with me." and strolled back toward the house.

"How are we going to get the van back home?" Angela asked.

"Maybe one of you could ease it up to the house, slowly." Sheila suggested.

"You're suggesting that one of us drive?" Angela asked. "None of us are near sixteen yet."

Sheila stopped and looked back at them and said, "Yeah, well. Do you see any traffic?"

The kids looked around. "No," they said.

"Then it shouldn't be a problem. Besides, you couldn't possibly do any worse than what I just did," she said as she took Lynette's hand.

The kids stood dumbfounded and waited until Sheila and Lynette were in the house. "Who is going to drive this thing?" Angela asked. "I'm only twelve."

"I would, but my arm is broken."

Terry jogged back to the van and got behind the wheel. "I've driven a tractor before. A van can't be all that different." Angela and Hayden quickly joined him and secured their seatbelts. The first few times he tried to start the van, nothing happened, but finally the engine revved, but he didn't know what he'd done differently to cause that.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Angela asked.

"Just wait a minute. I'll get us there." Terry said as he started the vehicle off with a jerk. Slowly, jerking the van along, weaving this way and that, the three kids finally parked the vehicle out front and climbed out.

“We made it,” Terry announced.

“Yeah, thanks,” Hayden said.

Terry’s dad drove up in a pickup and honked, “I’ve got to be going. See you guys later.” Terry said as he darted toward the pickup.

“Why?” Angela asked.

“We’re having ball practice. See you guys after awhile.”

Angela turned to Hayden and asked. “How can he leave us after all that’s happened?”

Hayden shrugged, “His coach is real serious about ball practice.”

Angela rolled her eyes off into the distance and wondered why guys were like that. ‘I wouldn’t leave my friends after a day like this,’ she thought.

When Hayden and Angela approached the porch, they found Lynette standing outside crying.

“Where’s mom?” Angela asked.

Lynette wailed even louder and pointed toward the door.

Hayden walked in while Angela hugged Lynette. Hayden yelled, “Call 911!” Angela hurried into the house and saw Hayden bent over their mother, who was crumpled at the bottom of the stairs.

“What are we going to do?” Angela cried.

“Call the ambulance,” Hayden insisted. “Call Dad, too. Tell him to hurry.”

Lynette clung to her sister and emitted whimpering squeals while Angela relayed the message to the 911 operator. Lynette could see the dolls forming at the

top of the stairs, but was unable to articulate the message and squealed loudly while Angela was telling her father that he needed to come home.

When Angela hung up the phone, she looked at her sister, who was emitting a high-pitched squeal as she pointed up the staircase. Angela looked up and saw four rows of dolls advancing from the top of the stairs. They were walking straight and stiff in rows of three. At the top of the stairs, the first row of dolls stepped down, each stepping identically. When they had descended two steps, the row behind them did the same, then the next and then the last row.

At the bottom of the stairs Hayden stood erect in front of his sisters. Together the three kids inched backward toward the door, rushed down the front steps and headed for the field closest to the house.

Three of the rows of dolls continued out the front door and descended the front steps, moving in sync and keeping their faces directed on the kids. They stopped at the bottom of the stairs.

The kids ran to the right and all the doll faces followed in that direction. Hayden said, "Quick, let's go to the other side of the house." Hayden held on to one of Lynette's hands, and Angela held the other as they ran to the other side of the house.

The dolls' heads turned directly toward them. The kids stopped to look back as the dolls took another step in their direction.

"Come on, we've got to go!" Angela yelled as she pulled her little sister along with her up a small hill.



Hayden stayed close behind. A few minutes later, they could no longer see the advancing dolls, though they knew in their hearts that they were still there, advancing, forever advancing.

Hayden got up and darted toward a taller hill not far away. "I'm going to see if they're still following us."

Off in the distance, Angela saw Hayden looking out over the hill with his one free hand held over his forehead blocking the sun. He turned to face the girls and yelled, "I think they're gone now."

"Are you sure?"

Hayden looked back toward the house. "I don't see any . . . ." Dolls hit him from behind, knocking him on his face. He scrambled in the dirt trying to free himself.

Angela trembled as she watched her brother being attacked.

"Look, Angela, Look! They're getting our brother."

Hayden slapped at the dolls while they tore his clothing and snatched out some of his hair. He squealed in pain.

Angela wanted to help, but she didn't know what to do. She grabbed a big stick and turned to Lynette, "Hide behind that tree and wait for me."

"I'm scared!" Lynette wailed.

"Me too."

Angela raced toward her brother and held the stick in front of her. Two dolls came running at her. She took her best swing and knocked one of them off the hill. Angela continued to swing as Hayden struggled to free himself.

The doll from the bottom of the hill climbed back up to rejoin the fight. Angela continued to swing against the other dolls until one of them jumped on her shoulders. She dropped the stick and tried to toss the doll off of her, but it held tight by latching onto her hair. Angela dropped the stick to free herself.

Hayden rose from the ground, grabbed a stick and swung as hard as he could against the dolls. Some of them didn't return. When he saw that the last remaining doll had its face firmly attached to Angela and was sucking her breath away, he grabbed the doll and pulled it off his sister.

Angela squirmed free. The doll firmly attached itself to Hayden's face.

"Help me!" Lynette called. Angela looked back at the tree where she'd left her sister and saw her being attacked. Angela raced for her sister while several of the dolls dived at Hayden, knocking him down. He lay there still and stiff while the little doll on top of him lay still as well.

Three dolls had a grip on Lynette's pretty brown hair and were dragging her away. Angela stomped the first two dolls and freed her sister's hair. She stomped the third and snatched the last strand of hair free as well.

She swung Lynette up over her shoulder and turned to see Hayden lying on the ground with a doll on top of him. Both were lying in a stiff manikin pose. Movement slowly returned to him as he rose from the fallen position. The other dolls had disappeared, except for one doll that was lying on the ground. Angela turned to look at the dolls that had held Lynette. They were gone. She turned to face Hayden again, while Lynette held onto her sister's neck.

Hayden walked stiffly like the dolls; he took two steps and quickly turned his head to stare at the girls. He looked at them, yet he didn't seem to see. His eyes were still icy blue, but colder than ever. Hayden looked out toward the house and moved methodically toward it. His gait had changed. He took his arm out of the sling, and pulled at the bandages.

The girls watched as he unwrapped his arm and stretched. He continued to move with jerky motion as he walked around, oblivious to their presence.

Angela and Lynette glared at one another, "That's not my brother!" Lynette said. The girls hid behind the tree once more and watched as Hayden continued to stretch and use his arm. He picked up a stick with it and threw it as if the arm had never been broken.

"That's not my brother," Lynette cried.

He turned to look at the girls.

Angela grabbed her sister and the two of them hid behind a cluster of trees not far from where Hayden had been attacked. "Shush, don't say anything," Angela said. "Let's just watch a while."

Hayden stretched as he walked toward the house. His once broken arm was now free of bandages. He stood there and glanced around while a glowing green light flashed from his eyes over the fertile area. He grinned, flexed his fingers, and swung his arm over his head, stretching it carefully as he walked away.

Angela grabbed the little doll that had been on top of Hayden. 'So this doll now holds all the good parts of Hayden,' she thought. She looked up at Hayden as he walked away, 'And there goes the evil doll.'

She looked at Lynette and stroked her sister's hair. "Dad's coming," Lynette said as she pointed toward the truck. Lynette leapt from behind the trees and darted toward the pickup that was approaching the front of the house. "Dad!" she yelled as she lunged into him with all her might.

Angela held her sister back. "No, that's not him. It's an old truck that looks a lot like his." Disappointed, Lynette snuggled close to her sister. The two of them began to inch closer to the street.

Soon, the ambulance pulled up to the house. Both girls met the EMT's and told them where their mother was.

The medic went inside and started working on Sheila immediately. Angela scanned the room as she and Lynette stepped back through the front door. Lynette wiped a few tears away from her face, "Hayden," she said. Hayden walked cockily toward the top of the stairs. He stretched his once-broken arm, as he strolled down the steps.

Angela looked up at him and trembled even more than before. "Oh, my God," she muttered.

Hayden didn't look at his mother as he stepped over her and the workers there, but he gave Angela and Lynette a confident grin as he flashed his eyes in their direction. He reached out to pick up Lynette.

She backed away and looked up at him, "You're not my brother, not at all. You're one of them. One of those damn dolls."

He tossed his head back and cackled while Angela looked on in horror. The ambulance workers had begun to look closely at him. They nudged each other and whispered and kept a close eye on Hayden as they continued to work on Sheila.

Angela watched as Hayden strolled out the front door and off into a wooded area not far from the house.

James pulled up just as they were loading Sheila in the ambulance. He hopped out of the truck and raced to embrace his daughters. He asked, "Where's your brother?"

"The dolls got him," Lynette said as she pushed away from her dad and gasped while tears streamed down her cheeks. James wiped away her tears. "They got him, and he is not my brother anymore."

James tossed his hands in the air and looked up, "No! That can't be. Where is he?"

"He unwrapped his broken arm as if nothing was wrong with it," Angela announced.

"He what?"

"He really isn't the same," Angela said as she looked out in the field where she'd seen her brother only a few minutes earlier. "He's out there somewhere."

An ambulance worker came over to speak to James before they took off toward the hospital.

Angela thought she saw a glimpse of her brother, but then, on closer inspection, she realized he really wasn't there.

As the ambulance carted Sheila away, James raced over to the trees and called Hayden, who didn't answer. He raced around the property calling in all directions, but Hayden didn't respond. Finally, James reentered the devil's den.

"Dad," Angela called. "Don't do it!"

He squinted his eyes at her, raised his brows and cocked his head to one side as he went in the house calling "Hayden, Hayden."

After James had given up on finding his son, Hayden stepped out of the field with his arm back in the sling. He walked toward the porch looking no different now from the way he did before the dolls attacked.

"Oh there you are son. I want to you to keep an eye on your sisters while I'm at the hospital with your mother."

Angela stood behind her brother shaking her head no and motioning to her father.

"Sure, we'll be fine here," Hayden agreed

James bounded down the steps and headed for the pickup. Angela followed and held Lynette's hand as she protested the situation. "Dad, don't leave us here. Not now, not with him."

"I can't take you right now. I'll call you as soon as I can. You'll be better off here at home. You'll be safe." James started the noisy engine of the old pickup.

"But dad, you don't know what's been going on. It really isn't safe. There's something evil out here, and it's got ahold of Hayden."

“Huh?” he said as he looked at the girls worried faces. “Your mom will be all right. Hayden will take care of you. Don’t worry,” James said as he put the truck in gear. “We’re in the country, not in the middle of some horror show. Your brother has things under control. I can assure you of that.”

Hayden smiled and nodded.

Angela looked sheepishly at him over her shoulder as her father pulled away. She mumbled. “I guess he does.” She looked at Lynette, who stood beside her, gazing up at her sister as if she were her only hope.

Angela felt at a loss as to what to say. This child was expecting protection, and Angela was the only one there who could really protect her. Hayden had crossed over to the other team now. Though Angela was certain that it had happened against his will, she had to acknowledge that he wasn’t the same Hayden that he was an hour ago.

Hayden pulled his arm out of the sling again and cackled. He raised both hands to the sky and danced around in a merry circle.

Where could Angela go for safety? How could she find a safe place in which to hide? God only knows but the dolls who had taken over Hayden were waiting to take over the girls. She didn’t know what was outside on the road, but she did know that anything was better than being attacked by one of those damnable dolls. She grabbed Lynette’s hand and the two of them darted out the door and ran off toward the road.

Hayden called after them, but they didn’t answer. He raced to catch up with them. They ran as fast as they could, but Hayden was much too fast for Lynette.

And there was no way Angela would leave Lynette behind. He caught them easily and placed his cold hand on Angela's shoulder. The same hand that should still be in a sling. "Come on Sis, it's time to go back."

"No, I don't want to."

"Dad said I was to look out for you two, and I'm going to do that. No matter what you say."

"You're not my brother, you've changed."

"No, you're wrong. I'm okay." He stepped back and smiled, placing both hands on his hips he said, "I'm the same as always."

"But just a minute ago," she said as she looked into his eyes and pointed back toward the field, "When you got up after fighting the doll, you weren't your usual self. You are changed, whether you know it or not."

"How can that be? If I were changed, wouldn't I know it?" He laughed and turned his sister to face the house. "It's just me, your loving brother."

"You are changed."

"How can that be? Look," he turned her around again. "It's just me."

"But the way you walked. You've unwrapped your arm?" Angela said. "Just yesterday it was broken. I know. It was as if you had an extra elbow above the wrist. And now, you've unwrapped it as if noting was wrong with it."

"Yes, wow. Isn't that great?"

"Doesn't that seem a bit odd to you? It's abnormal. Nobody heals that fast, nobody!"

"Not really."



He laughed and guided Lynette toward the house. Lynette was looking back over her shoulder, practically begging Angela to rescue her.

“The dolls were attacking us a while ago, and one of them had you down on the ground.”

Hayden turned his head away from Angela and walked away. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The doll sucked away your soul.”

“I don’t remember that. You must have been hallucinating again.”

“No I wasn’t. Just ask Lynette. She saw it too.”

Hayden stopped walking, looked at Lynette, and stretched out his arms in a big come-to-daddy pose. “Lynette.”

“Get away from me, you doll,” Lynette yelled as she kicked her brother and lunged into Angela.

“I’m your brother. Not a doll.”

“You’re not my brother. Not anymore.”

“What has gotten into you two girls? You’re acting as if something horrible has happened.”

“It has,” Angela said as she inched away from him.

“Well, I have to admit it hasn’t been a completely fun day. There was Corky’s death and all, but there’s nothing different about me.”

“Aren’t you concerned at all about mom?”

“She’ll be all right.”

“You don’t know that. They just took her away. She wasn’t conscious.”

“She’s fine. Trust me. I know she is.” Hayden put his right arm around Lynette and led her toward the house. “Come on, nothing’s changed, nothing at all.”

Lynette’s eyes bugged out as he touched her.

Angela stood there in the road reflecting on what had just happened. It wasn’t possible, and she knew it. How could her brother take the bandages from his arm and fling them to one side?

It wasn’t natural. He couldn’t be the same, and yet now he did seem somewhat familiar. Part of him was there. She looked at him as he led Lynette into the house and wondered just what part of him was it that was in charge now. The evil Hayden, or the real Hayden?

She shuddered to think that the evil Hayden might very well be the one who had his arm on Lynette. She wanted to run away and save herself, but obviously Lynette was trapped. If she were to be the sister she ought to be, she had to rescue Lynette.

Angela raced toward the house after her siblings. When she got there, Hayden was sitting in a chair reading to Lynette, who was on his lap. But Lynette didn’t look at all interested. Hayden was acting as if nothing in this world was wrong. Yet, everything was wrong. How could he sit there and be all brotherly and entertaining while Lynette’s cheeks were still covered in tears.

Angela didn’t know how to react. She simply sat motionless and kept her eyes on Hayden, wondering what her next move would be, where she would go and

how she could save herself and her sister. What was going on with Hayden was far too weird. She couldn't trust him, not now, perhaps never again.

She didn't want to go upstairs for anything, in spite of the fact that she had become aware of a pressing need to use the bathroom. She still didn't know what was up there. She didn't want to go to the barn; after all, that's where Corky died. There was no place to run. She had to stay with her brother, the sitter, the strange new Hayden. Fear was taking hold of her as never before. She didn't know whether there would be a way she could escape or whether she could save Lynette. What would happen next if one of those damnable dolls appeared? If Hayden wouldn't help her, what would she do? She thought about going to Gala's house. Though she'd never been there, she was certain that it had to be safer than staying in this house. In spite of the fact that her dad told her to stay with Hayden, she knew she had to find a way to get away from him.

Of primary importance right now was rescuing Lynette and not raising Hayden's suspicions. Since Hayden was in charge, she would probably have to wait until he was asleep. And by that time it would be in the middle of the night. She couldn't just show up on the doorstep in the middle of the night at Gala's house. She had to have a plan. Suddenly, Terry walked through the door. Angela looked at him as if he were her only hope. She wanted to talk to him, to tell him what happened. She needed to get him alone, but she didn't want to leave Lynette with Hayden, not even for a minute. And of course, she couldn't say anything in front of her brother.

“Hi, there,” Terry said. He looked around at the three of them, sensing the tension in the room. “What going on in here?”

“Nothing,” Hayden answered as he got up to greet Terry. “I thought you were going to ball practice.”

Terry shrugged, “It got cancelled.” The two of them walked out on the porch.

Lynette came rushing toward her sister. Angela grabbed her up and held her tight. Angela looked down at Lynette, who looked as if she’d been rolling in dirt, as indeed all of them had.

“Perhaps we would be safe from Hayden in the bathroom,” she said. She took Lynette by the hand and dragged her upstairs, gathered up fresh clothes for both of them, retreated to the bathroom, and locked the door.

While they changed, they heard the noisy pickup pull up outside.

“Dad’s home,” Angela exclaimed. She grinned and took hold of Lynette’s shoulders. “We’re going to be safe now. Dad’s back.”

When they came out, James was downstairs talking to the boys, “Kids, your mom is going to be alright. She has a broken leg and is in surgery right now.”

Angela smiled, “Oh Dad, I was so worried.”

“Me too. But everything going to be okay.”

“I don’t think you should stay here without an adult. I need to make other arrangements until your mom comes home.”

Terry piped in, “Hayden can stay at my house for a while. My parents won’t mind.”

“Great, get your things, Hayden.” James turned to address the girls. “I’ll make arrangements you two girls to stay with the Johnsons until your mom comes home.

Angela nodded.

“I’ll go speak with them after we drop Hayden off.”

“Did mom tell you what happened here?” Angela asked.

“She’s still unconscious.”

Angela started to speak, but her dad looked at his watch and said, “Quick, get your things. We can talk about this on the way. I need to get back to the hospital, so I can be there when your mother comes out of surgery.”

## Chapter 15

“When your dad dropped you off, he seemed pretty shook up,” Mr. Johnson said and he crossed the front room and took a seat in his brown easy chair across from the girls.

“We’ve had an awful day,” Angela explained. “First Corky was murdered, then mom took that awful fall.”

“What exactly happened there?”

Lynette rushed to Mr. Johnson’s side tapped him on the arm and said, “Our brother has gone mad.”

“Shush. Lynette,” Angela scolded, for she was concerned about what Mr. Johnson would think of them if they started off telling that story. “Our dog was murdered, but we didn’t see it happen.”

“It was the dolls,” Lynette continued.

Angela held her hand up to silence her sister. “Then mom fell. Or I guess she fell. We found her at the bottom of the stairs.”

“The doll tripped my mommy. I saw it. I saw it all.”

“Oh, then suppose you tell me exactly what you saw,” Mr. Johnson said as he placed Lynette on his lap. Angela looked up at Mrs. Johnson, who had just stepped through the door.

“Mom was grabbing the dolls and burning them,” Lynette said. “She’d just thrown a bunch of dolls in the fire and was going upstairs to gather the rest of the dolls, and this doll came out of nowhere and tripped her.”

“You must have been scared.”

“Yes, I was scared. I was really scared.”

Mrs. Johnson adjusted a seat cushion before she crunched herself up in the chair with her feet under her bottom. “You dad’s been very concerned about you kids.”

“Then my brother was fighting the dolls and they were chasing us and stuff.”

“Yeah!” Mr. Johnson patted Lynette on the back and kept his eyes fixed on her.

“And this one doll got up in Hayden’s face and sucked his breath away.”

“That so?”

“Hayden’s not my brother anymore. He’s a doll. He walks like a doll and his eyes shoot this green light and everything.”

“I see.”

Angela wanted to fall through a hole, though none was available. In spite of the fact that everything that Lynette was saying was true, Angela felt as if the Johnsons would only be laughing at them for talking about it. She looked first at Mr. Johnson and then at Mrs. Johnson, and neither one of them seemed offended or surprised, but that didn't mean they weren't laughing on the inside. ‘What are they thinking?’ Angela wondered but didn't dare ask.

“That's why we're here and Hayden is at Terry's,” Lynette continued.

Mrs. Johnson smiled at the four-year-old. “Yes. Don't worry, you'll be safe here with us for a few days till you mom gets out of the hospital. You and Angela can stay in Gala's room. Her day-bed has a popup trundle attached. There will be plenty of room for three little girls there.”

Gala stepped over the threshold. “Come on, I'll show you my room.”

Angela wondered whether she'd been standing there the whole time, or whether she'd missed Lynette's rendition of the day's events. The girls followed Gala up the staircase to her room, which was painted in bright colors, a mixture of red, violet, yellow and green. The good news? There wasn't a doll in sight.

Sports paraphernalia hung on the walls, along with a guitar and a ukulele. “Hang you stuff in there,” Gala directed as she opened the closet. She picked up her guitar and started fiddling with it as Angela put their things away.

Lynette hugged her teddy bear and took a seat on the day-bed. Mrs. Johnson came in, smiled at the girls, and put the trundle in place.



“Honey, the ice cream machine has quit working,” Mr. Johnson called from downstairs.

“That means it’s done,” Mrs. Johnson said, “Honestly, what would he do without me?” She hurried off to take care of the problem.

Angela hopped up on the bed with Lynette. Gala put the guitar away and pulled out a couple of backrests and a few pillows and tossed them in place, then joined the other girls, who were sitting cross-legged in the middle of the bed.

“Your room is so cool,” Angela said as she gazed at all the pretty things.

“Thanks, I couldn’t decide on one color, so mom suggested I just use a lot of color.”

“I like it,” Angela said.

Gala strained her face as she pressed her lips together.

Angela thought Gala was getting ready to cry. She’d never seen her friend look so sad, “You heard?”

Gala nodded and reached for a tissue, “Um hum.”

Angela adjusted herself against one of the pillows as she listened to Lynette hum to her teddy bear. She wondered just how much Gala knew and what her friend really believed. As Gala got up to toss her tissue in the trash, Angela asked, “What do you think?”

Gala turned to face her friend, “I don’t know what to think”.

“Your mom and dad seem nice.”

“Yes,” Gala nodded.

“They didn’t question Lynette’s story.”

“No, they didn’t.”

Angela couldn’t stand the suspense anymore, so she sat straight up and blurted out, “For Christ sake, why don’t you tell me what you think. What you believe?”

Gala pulled a backrest in place and leaned up against it.

“You’ve made fun of me, laughed at me and now,” Angela continued. “I just want to know . . .”

“What to know what?”

“Whose side you’re on. Do you believe us or not?”

“My parents have been talking about that story a lot since they heard.” Gala shrugged her shoulders, “I don’t know what to say.”

Lynette danced her little bear around the bed, chatting with him in a baby sort of way.

“Say something.”

“Like what?”

Angela couldn’t stand it anymore. She wanted to be friends with Gala. She needed to be friends with her, so she reached out to her directly, “For crying out loud, Gala. We’ve been through a horrifying experience. Our mom is in the hospital. Our dog is dead. And now we can’t go home because its been invaded or was invaded by living, soul-sucking dolls.”

“Yeah, that’s what my folks said.”

“So, they do believe.”

“Yes, and they told me I should . . .” Gala rested her head on her bent knees.

“Should what?”

“Apologize,” Gala whispered.

“What?” Angela leaned forward

Gala raised her head and looked directly into her friend’s eyes, “They told me I should apologize to you. That’s what friends do. So, I suppose for what its worth, I am sorry I didn’t take your concerns more seriously. There, are you happy? Does that make you feel good? I hope so because I don’t feel so good about it.”

Angela leaned back and rolled her eyes to the ceiling wondering whether that apology was sincere or not. She looked at Gala, who was grabbing for another tissue, and answered her friend, “Well, geez, Gala, for what it’s worth, I guess I accept your apology,” She nodded her head a couple of times. “Yeah, that’s it. Apology accepted.”

Gala wiped her eyes with the tissue.

“Should we start this friendship all over again?” Angela asked. “Hi, I’m Angela, and this is my sister Lynette. And your name?”

“You know my name!” Gala whined.

Angela crawled across the bed next to her friend, placed her arms around her. The two girls cried together.

A little while later Gala said, “I’m glad you’re going to be staying here for a while.”

“Why?”

“I haven’t had anyone to talk to lately.”

“What about Christine? I thought you talked to her all the time.”

Gala got up and walked toward the window. She turned and looked directly at Angela and said. “I don’t know what it is, but she seems changed.”

“How so?”

“Mom says she’s just growing up and that she has a boyfriend now and all, but she’s always had a boyfriend, so that can’t be it. There’s something else going on with her. She doesn’t even walk the same.”

The hair on Angela’s neck prickled and Lynette suddenly got still and opened her eyes wide.

“Maybe she’s trying to act more glamorous.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“What do you think it is?”

Lynette chimed in, “Maybe the dolls got her like they got Hayden.”

Gala laughed, “Yeah. Maybe they did.”

Angela knew from her response that she really didn’t believe.

Gala shrugged her shoulders and said, “It’s pretty hard to tell, isn’t it?”

Angela thought about that for a moment. She hadn’t noticed the changes in Christine. Surely, there was nothing wrong with her. Gala had to be imagining it. She wouldn’t put it past Gala to try to scare her by playing along with what she’d heard Lynette say a little while ago. It wouldn’t be a nice thing to do after the fright they’d had. But when was Gala ever nice before? She wasn’t this nice other

than on the day she met her and on that one trip to the old house. Angela really didn't believe her so-called friend. She had to stay here and felt safe being away from Hayden, but she wasn't so sure she could trust this girl, not yet.

Angela changed the subject slightly, "Dad is going to stay at the house for a few days by himself. He says he just wants to keep an eye on things and get the place ready for mom. She's got a broken leg, you know. And he said he would have to move everything around so she won't have to go upstairs anymore."

"Oh, I see," Gala said as she took the hairbrush from the side table and began brushing her hair.

"He said he was going to find us a babysitter," Angela scooted up to the blue backrest and circled her hands around her bent knees. "I told him he didn't need to do that. But he said he didn't want us to be out there where the dog had been attacked, with mom unable to get up and run around like she usually does. He said it wouldn't be right. After what happened to Corky, he's concerned about who might be hanging out in the woods."

"That's why you're here," Gala said as she secured her hair with a turquoise ribbon.

"Yes," Angela said as she stretched out across the bed behind Lynette, who was still playing with her teddy bear.

Gala crossed the room and looked out the window, "Dad's firing up the grill right now."

"He's going to cook?"

“Yeah, he cooks all the time. He’s cooked more than ever since my brother was born. He said that grandpa told him that if he wanted to get married and stay married there were three things he had to do, and he had to do them well because a wife in the twenty-first century won’t put up with anything less.”

“Really?”

“He must cook at least three good healthy meals and do them very well on a regular basis.”

“Really? What are the other two?”

“I forget,” Gala said as she returned to the daybed and stood at the edge talking, “But it has to do with household chores. I know that.”

“Maybe it’s laundry. I never see my dad doing the laundry, but mom says he does it when we’re at school.”

“Why is that?”

“During the school year, mom works all the time, and daddy doesn’t have much work to do. So he does most of the household stuff in the winter, and mom does most of it in the summer.”

“Does that work?”

“Works for them. When dad cooks, he cooks on the grill.”

“That counts. My dad always cooks on the grill. Mom cooks in the kitchen. That way they don’t get in each other’s space. That’s what mom says.”

Later that evening, James dropped by to have dinner with his old friends and the girls before returning to the hospital. Once they were all settled at the dining room table, James said, “It’s been a long day.”

“You looked over the property?” Mr. Johnson asked

“Yes, I’ve scanned the house and looked everywhere and didn’t see signs of anyone living out there in the field.”

Mr. Johnson nodded as he handed James a plate of dinner rolls.

“I appreciate you looking after the girls for a while. They seemed plenty spooked. Lynette said a doll had chased them. Now I know that it’s pretty far-fetched to think that a doll would kill a dog, but that’s what they think.”

Angela gave her dad a scathing look. ‘After all,’ she thought, ‘we’re sitting right here. Why does he have to talk about us like that right in front of us?’

“They said Hayden had become possessed by the dolls and that a doll either tripped or shoved Sheila down the stairs. Sheila did trip on a doll. The rest of the story is still a tad baffling.”

Phil Johnson became more solemn, pushed his plate aside, and looked down.

“What is it about this place that is so very different? Why are my kids freaking out in the one town that I feel so comfortable in? Why has this been such a traumatic summer?”

Phil adjusted himself in his seat and looked away.

Mrs. Johnson gathered the empty dishes, placed them by the sink, and left the room. Phil followed her with his eyes. She paused at the door and looked back at the two of them, giving her husband a serious look. She rested her eyes on James and then on her husband, and she said, “He has a right to know.”

“Know what?”

Phil looked at his friend and said, "It's hardly worth mentioning."

"Mention it, then."

Phil Johnson got up and began filling the bowls with ice cream, "You know, James, there may be some truth to what they are saying. There is something out here that changes people. If they say Hayden isn't the same, I'd say that you need to believe them."

'At last,' Angela thought, 'Someone is on my side.'

"Are you saying that my son has become dangerous?"

"No, I don't know anything about it, but the country has a way of changing people."

"My son is no different than the day we came."

"Many of our friends have changed considerably over the years, and not in a good way."

"What do you mean?"

The three girls listened intently while they ate their ice cream.

"Most of them seem to have less compassion than they should," Phil said as he loaded a spoon with the pink ice cream.

"They are busy people. You have to admit most of them certainly made something of themselves."

"Look, I don't want to talk about this, but the truth of the matter is that this place isn't the same place it used to be. The people have changed, and the people we once knew are the victims of that change."



“I hardly see how they can be called victims. Arnie’s a lawyer now, and Henry is up for a judgeship.”

Phil dropped his spoon in the bowl and looked James in the eye, “Yes, and you remember how sweet some of our holidays were.”

“Yes, well. We had some really good times back then.”

“Well, no one comes home from the big time unscathed. It’s like the holidays are not as pure as they once were. The people are going through the motions, but no one has the love.”

“We’re all older now, less naïve. It’s only natural to see the people we love from a different perspective than we did when we were young.”

“I’m saying that the people we once loved, Jessica included, are full of something that is well . . . not of this world, not of the loving, kind nature that life once had. This place is full of empty shells of humanity. It’s like when they left town, they left the best parts of themselves behind.”

“How can you say that? What does that have to do with the dolls?” James asked as he pushed back from the table, gathered the girls’ empty ice cream bowls and carried them to the sink. He turned and asked his friend, “What are they then? Are they all freaks?”

“They’re like stick men, stiff, empty, heartless people putting on a show. A streak of cruelty runs through them, through them all.”

“So you’re saying that when we grow up and leave that we become something other than what we were. We should become something better,

something stronger: people who fight for what we believe in and put our best foot forward.”

Phil banged his fist against the table, “No, damn it, no! You’re not getting it. Maybe you just don’t want to see the truth, but the truth is right in front of you. Open your eyes.”

James looked down at the girls at the table. “They’re just children, children with strong imaginations. You’re absolutely out of your mind.”

“Am I? You said yourself that your daughters were spooked about something in the house, a doll, if you will, that had human eyes. They say its taken over Hayden.”

“So.”

“They aren’t lying. Many of the people we once knew, loved and believed in are not who they seem to be.”

“You’re saying? What? That they’re aliens?”

“They left their humanity behind. They left the better part of themselves in the form of little dolls. Some dolls do come to life and attack people. They attack the better part of man.”

Angela thought, ‘Oh my god. So this has been going on for a long time, a very long time.’

“They suck all that is good out of people and they leave an essence of evil behind in the human form. I’m saying that all that is left is the drive, the ambition. The selfishness that makes them move on. It’s like they get a high off of being looked up to. They get a high off of hurting the little guy. These humans lose part

of their humanity this way. They go on living and walking and breathing, but they are not so pure anymore. They are not necessarily true humans.”

Silence filled the room as James walked slowly to his chair.

“What about Hayden?” Angela asked, “Does this mean that he is no longer a true human?”

Phil ran his fingers through his hair and stared at the floor. James took his seat and looked Angela directly in the eye. Phil looked at her too and said, “No, he’s human. I didn’t mean it. Just forget I said anything.”

After listening to their dads talk, the girls became more somber, as if they’d come to understand what was happening much more clearly. The girls got up and left the room.

“I don’t believe you, Phil,” James said as he shook his head.

“The girls have seen what you refuse to see. They’ve seen the dolls in action, and the so-called stick men that are left in their wake. People are having their humanity stolen from them right now, here in this community, as we speak.”

“You’re saying that’s what happened to Hayden.”

“Yes, damn it, yes.”

“What will happen to him?” James asked as he paced the floor. “Isn’t there any good news?”

“Well, yes, there is. They don’t seem to suffer from the common diseases that most of us do. And when they are injured or in an accident, they heal almost immediately.”

“So that’s why Hayden’s arm is well now.”

“Yes, exactly, that’s the proof that the girls are not lying. His arm is completely healed.”

## Chapter 16

The girls retreated to Gala's room to watch a movie and didn't talk for quite a while. It was as if something evil were lurking over them. Angela and Lynette had already faced the terror, and now Gala couldn't insist that the horror didn't exist. They were finally on the same page.

But Angela didn't know which side of the page Gala rested on, whether the dolls had already overtaken her or whether she was a potential victim awaiting a horrible fate.

The girls didn't want to sleep in the dark, so they moved one of the hall night-lights to the bedroom. Late in the first evening, Angel heard someone walking around in the hall, but she thought it was one of Gala's parents. The door

creaked open. Angela looked up and thought she saw one of the parents looking in. She rolled over and tried to pretend to go back to sleep. About fifteen minutes later, the night light went out and something jumped on the bed. The creature jumped up and down and screamed at the top of her lungs. Gala got up and turned on a light. The creature was Lynette. She was freaking out: no night-light, no peace, no quiet, no tranquility. This time the people who came through their door were no doubt Mr. and Mrs. Johnson. And sure enough, Lynette had awakened the baby.

“Lynette, you woke up the baby,” Angela scolded.

“I’m scared. It was dark, and there was this doll standing on the bed. Big beams of green light were coming from her eyes and she was staring at me, just staring. It was awful.”

Mrs. Johnson said. “There aren’t any dolls here.”

“It’s not a dream. It’s not.” Lynette continued. “It was real.”

Mrs. Johnson trembled, grabbed her husband’s arm and looked him in the eye.

“Our night-light went out,” Gala said.

“Go get the one in the hall down stairs and bring it up here.” Mr. Johnson suggested. “I’ll fix yours tomorrow.”

With another light in place and everyone tucked back into beds, the girls settled down once more. They heard someone snoring from down the hall. Gala said it was her mom. The girls went to sleep that night and woke to a fresh day as if nothing had ever been wrong.

The next day Gala and Lynette started to take a walk out to the pond. They didn't want to meet up with danger, but they were certainly tired of hanging around the house. They were afraid that they would bump into Hayden or whoever was out there. They didn't make it any farther than the gazebo in Gala's back yard. But that was great. They could use that as a playhouse, and at least they were out of the regular house and had a safe place to play in a fenced-in yard.

The next few nights were similar to the first night, but the girls were less tense, less frightened and a little fussy with each other.

James came by again and checked on the girls, as he did everyday. Only once had he skipped, and that was because he thought he ought to stay at the hospital with Sheila because he thought she needed him. She'd been in a lot of pain. He'd come over and have dinner with them every day. Each day mom was getting better, and still nothing sinister had happened at the Bradford house.

"We're going home in the morning," James said. "Your mom is coming home. It's time to get our lives back to normal."

They watched another movie and went to bed earlier the fourth night.

They were no longer concerned about anything sinister happening here. They were calm and comfortable in this new haven, and they appreciated the safety.

Tonight Mr. Johnson had been called on to help one of the neighbors round up his cattle. The neighbor was transporting a truckload of them when something went wrong with the hitch connecting the trailer to the truck. All the cattle were

loose, and all the available neighbors were helping to round them up. It was one of those neighborly things that happen out in the country – people helping people.

He got back rather late. Even James had come in early and helped with the round-up before going to the hospital. They'd shut down because of the rain, but rounding up cattle couldn't be halted just because of a little rain.

Tonight was the first night that Mrs. Johnson had cooked. She made spaghetti. The girls settled in fairly early. Lynette slept in the middle, as always. She said she felt safer when the other girls were on the outside.

In the middle of the night once again, the night-light went out. Someone was jumping up and down on the bed. But this time there were no screams from Lynette.

Several dolls had surrounded the bed. One doll was much bigger than the other dolls. It lit a match and held it at its waist as it lit the candle on the bedside table. The big doll looked somewhat familiar. The little dolls tried to attach themselves to the girls. One had hold of Lynette's face and had begun to suck the life out of her when Angela slapped at the doll, freeing her sister.

Gala was waging war on the other side of the table. A little doll attached itself to Lynette's face once again. This time when Angela swung at the doll, it went flying into the lit candle, which ignited the curtains, and some papers that were there on the floor, as well as the little doll that Angela had hit. Angela began grabbing at other dolls and throwing them into the flames. Gala did the same. Lynette jumped up and down on the bed and screamed. The fire grew with each additional doll.



When Mr. Johnson wearily opened the door and saw the frenzy, the big doll leapt out the window. “Girls, get out of the room,” Mr. Johnson yelled. The dolls scattered faster than the kids did. “Go downstairs and out on the lawn. Stay away from house.”

Angela jumped out of bed, dragging Lynette with her. The two of them hurried toward the staircase and were greeted by flames.

“Wait Angela! Wait!” Gala called.

Angela didn’t listen. When she got to the hall, she couldn’t see through the smoke. She hurried toward the staircase, misjudged the distance of the first step, and tumbled head over heel until she hit the bottom. Lynette raced after her. Angela was disoriented from the fall. Her ankle was throbbing. She took Lynette’s hand and tried to crawl out of the house.

Gala caught up with them and directed them toward the door.

The large creature walked stiffly through the burning house as if nothing were wrong. It turned and looked at the family struggling to get out. With no remorse or concern in its expression, it turned his back on them, piercing Angela and Lynette with an icy stare as it walked past them on the lawn, gloating and smiling at the calamity.

Mrs. Johnson and little Philip were trapped for a while. Finally, Mr. Johnson retrieved a hoe and broke through the wall to pull them to safety.

The creature’s smile dropped. It stood motionless as the family rushed to greet the three girls already on the lawn.

When Mr. Johnson saw the creature out in the bushes, he grabbed a flaming board and chased it in an attempt to torch the leaves, but the creature dodged the attack and circled around to slap at him from behind.

“Look out!” Mrs. Johnson called. Mr. Johnson turned in time to be knocked to the ground. He quickly jumped to his feet, grabbed a branch in the yard, and swung at the creature.

While they were fighting, Angela thought that the doll looked familiar. It looked like someone she knew, but she couldn't be quite sure. She inched closer to get a closer look. The eyes were definitely human, and the features of that human in some ways mirrored her own. As she looked more and more closely at the monster, she couldn't help but wonder how much it looked like her brother. ‘No, it couldn't be,’ she thought.

But she wasn't sure. ‘Mr. Johnson's don't!’

He slammed a large board against the mutated creature. Flames shot out on the creature's sleeve and its left arm was ablaze. The creature howled and dropped on the ground and rolled. When Mr. Johnson snatched at it and pulled it up, it looked more human than it did before, and this time there could be no doubt. It was a young boy. Mr. Johnson let go of him. The figure ran off into the darkness.

The victims stood motionless and listened as hideous laughter echoed through the tree branches. Firefighters assembled behind them, working diligently to put out the blaze, but the victims stood frozen with fear, staring out into the darkness.

Mr. and Mrs. Johnson held each other tightly with their baby between them and Gala cuddled up next to her dad. Lynette held onto Angela. Angela held onto her wounded ankle.

A police officer came to take a report, "Johnson, could you tell us what happened here?"

"No, I don't know," he said as he loosened his grip on his wife and held Gala with both arms.

"Come on, you've been looking out into that field for thirty minutes as if you were staring at Satan himself. What do you see out there that the rest of us don't?" the officer asked.

"I don't know," Mr. Johnson said as he brushed his forehead and looked out into the open field. "I honestly don't know."

A firefighter approached the officer. They spoke privately with two other firefighters, looking back at the family occasionally.

Mr. Johnson motioned for the kids to get in the truck. "I will take you home."

The police officer returned, "You need to come downtown to make a statement, Johnson. You can do that after you get settled in someplace safe."

"I'd like to come tonight. Let me drop these kids off and find a place to stay, then I'll come by," he promised as he climbed into the pickup.

"What are you going to say, Phil?" Mrs. Johnson asked as they pulled out of the drive.

“I don’t know. You saw it. We all saw it, but what are we going to do?”

Mr. Johnson said as he drove silently toward the Harrison home.

Down a lonely stretch of road a huge black shadowy figure crossed their path, but Mr. Johnson was the only one to see it. He batted his eyes, shook his head, then drove on.

At the Harrisons’, Mr. Johnson stepped inside while the girls blurted out the news. James invited them to stay.

Mr. Johnson told them that he needed to go to the police headquarters and tell his version of the event.

“Can’t that wait till morning?” Mrs. Johnson asked.

“No, I can’t sleep. I think it would be best if I go now. Everyone appears to be safe.” On the way out, he tapped James on the shoulder and nodded at the door.

The men chatted on the porch for some time before Phil left.

When James came back in, his face had grown pale. He immediately went to his room and loaded his Smith and Wesson and placed the pistol in the drawer.

On the way to the police station, Phil Johnson drove through the same area where he had previously spied the shadowy figure. Suddenly, someone stepped in front of his truck. Phil could not stop in time. The truck spun out of control.

Shaken and startled, Phil caught his breath before he climbed out of the wreckage. On the road in plain view lay a fleshly disaster. The victim’s clothing was torn and covered in blood. Phil rushed toward the victim, who was lying in a bloody mess, with bare bones shooting out in odd angles.

Phil watched as new tissue grew in place, covering the boy's bones. As the body healed, the boy sat up as if he'd only received a scrape, but the clothing remained shredded and burnt. The victim was the same young boy Mr. Johnson had battled in his yard earlier. Once the wounds were healed, the young boy got up and ran out into the woods.

## Chapter 17

While Sheila was in the hospital, she stopped smoking. She was definitely coming home a different woman from the one she had been when she left. That part was for the better, but what else about her had changed? No matter, Angela couldn't wait till her mom came home. She knew her mother hadn't been taken over, because she hadn't healed quickly.

She'd witnessed them taking over Hayden. They changed him, no doubt about that. Some of those changes were for the better. He was more hateful than usual, but he'd taken to bathing twice a day. And then there is the fact that his arm had healed so completely and so quickly. Nothing about that could be normal. But for the most part, he didn't seem all that frightening.

Hayden came into the room and popped her with a dishtowel. “Can’t you do anything around here? Quick, set the table.”

Angela just glanced at her brother and then gazed back out the window in time to see her father drive up. She watched as James helped Sheila out of the car. If there had been any doubt before, it all vanished now. Sheila didn’t look all that good.

“Get your filthy hand off of me, you damn dirty ape!” sounded from the movie in the next room as the screen door creaked open. Sheila hobbled through the front door on her crutches with dad close behind.

“Mom,” Lynette squealed and ran up to her mother to try and hug her. Sheila found a place to sit and plunked down, casting the crutches to one side. James helped Lynette up on the arm of the chair, so she could properly hug her mother. She planted a sticky lollypop kiss on her mother’s cheek.

James pulled her to one side. “Good grief!” he cried.

Hayden stepped through the kitchen doorway wearing an apron. “She’s one sticky mess,” he said. A timer went off behind him. He jumped and said, “That’s the lasagna,” he turned and went back into the kitchen.

“All I asked you to do was help her find something to eat while I helped your mom into the house,” James scolded Angela, “Why did it have to be candy. You could have given her some fruit.” He hurried off with Lynette to clean her up.

Hayden came out of the kitchen and announced, “Lunch is ready.”

“Everything?” Sheila asked. “You fixed the entire meal?”

“Yes,” he said as he slipped the apron off and cast it aside. He hurried back into the kitchen and came out moments later with a glass of ice tea for his mom.

“Thank you Hayden,” Sheila said, looking at her son as if she didn’t know who he was.

Hayden sat in the blue chair opposite his mom, picked up a nail file, and started working on his nails. Sheila looked at him as if she’d never seen him before.

Angela eyed them both. She knew deep down in her heart that her mother knew he was different, but would probably never admit it.

“Mom, what happened?” Angela asked, “How did you get hurt?”

“I don’t remember exactly,” she said. Sheila took a sip of ice tea, “all I remember is that I was sitting by Lynette and heard a noise. I went upstairs to check it out. The next thing I remember was waking up in the hospital.”

“You don’t remember burning the dolls?”

“No, did I do that?”

“Lynette said you did.”

Sheila shook her head and said, “I honestly have no recollection of it.”

Angela and Gala went back to watching their movie. There had been so much commotion in the past few days that Angela was quite certain that no one would remember her birthday today. She wanted a new I-pod for her birthday, but she was quite certain that she wouldn’t be getting it. But as things go, getting an I-pod would not be as great experience as getting away from those dolls, and she



wondered whether she would ever get away from them. She wondered whether she too would become like Hayden, weird. And she didn't want it to happen.

A strong knock sounded at the door. Angela jumped out of her seat to answer it, since James was out of the room and Sheila couldn't move. Angela opened the door for Christine, who entered with a big package in her hand.

"Happy Birthday, Angela," Christine said as she placed her right arm around Angela's neck and gave her a big squeeze. That's when Angela noticed Terry still out on the porch. He shook his head at her as if he really didn't want anyone to notice he was there.

"Ah haw! You come bearing gifts," Hayden said as he stepped through the door. He passed along behind Christine, giving her a special, delicate, secret smile. Christine chuckled and pranced into the front room where Sheila was adjusting her pillow. Hayden took the package from Christine's hands. "I'll take that," he said as he hurried through the kitchen door.

"Wow! It looks great," Angela said as she grinned at her friend. "What is it?"

"It's a surprise for the birthday girl," Christine said.

Terry tapped Angela on the shoulder and motioned for her to join him outside.

"Good morning, Mrs. Harrison," Christine said upon entering the room.

"Good morning. Sheila, call me Sheila."

"Very well, Sheila. Mr. Johnson or James, yes, James hired me to come and help out around here for a while. I've been cleaning houses and babysitting for

extra money for the last two summers. So don't think that just because I'm young that I can't do the job."

"I didn't think that."

"Well some people think I'm too young to work because I'm only fifteen."

"You are too young to work at a real job, but this is only temporary, and its not like you will have to do anything hard. Most of the meals will be frozen, or James will be home in time to take care of that. You might fix a few sandwiches, but mostly we just want you to be here to call for help in case something goes wrong."

Lynette came through the room completely soaked in a pink liquid.

"There's something that has gone completely wrong already: Lynette has been into something. Angela must have left her unattended. It's too much to expect her watch her sister every minute. Would you mind?"

"No, not at all. I'll be glad to take care of Lynette's little problem." She said. She grinned at Hayden as she picked up the little girl and held her above her head, grinning up at her.

Lynette squealed. "Put me down! Akkk! I don't want you to touch me! Put me down!"

Christine set her down again. "My, my, you are a little frightened, aren't you?"

Lynette rushed to her mother's side, looked back at Christine and snapped, "I don't like you. Don't touch me."

“Now Lynette. This is Christine; she’s going to be staying with us for a while. She’s going to help you get into some fresh clothes.”

“I don’t want to wear fresh clothes. I like the things I’m wearing.”

“You’re all wet, sweetie. You need to put on something else.” Christine stretched out her hand and held it toward Lynette. Lynette backed away.

“She’s different.”

Christine took another step toward the little girl.

“She’s weird. Weird, like Hayden. I don’t want her to touch me.”

Outside, Terry hugged Angela and whispered in her ear. “I didn’t come to see Hayden. I came to see you.”

Angela followed him out. “What’s going on?” she asked, overjoyed that he really wanted to spend a few minutes with her. She couldn’t help but look at him admiringly. He was dressed so neatly and his hair had been clipped in a more stylish fashion.

“I have to talk to you,” Terry said.

“What about?”

“Hayden,” Terry bit his lip as he stepped away from the house.

Angela followed him out onto the front lawn near some folding chairs.

“He’s a totally different person,” she said. “Do you know what he’s been doing? He’s cooking.”

“Yes, he started that at our house. Christine was teaching him how.”

“And he’s so clean. He bathes twice a day now.”

“I know. I want you to listen to me very carefully, before he comes out here and catches us talking.”

“What is it?”

“You’ve got to watch out for him. He’s up to some mischief.”

“Oh, you noticed,” she said as she glance over her shoulder. “He’s always up to mischief.”

“He disappeared on us the night that Gala’s house burned,” Terry took a seat in one of the lawn chairs and motioned for Angela to sit in a chair close to him

“I knew it,” Angela gasped. “He was at the Johnson’s. I saw him, or I have to say that I saw a large creature that looked like him. Just before the house burned he was in our room, and then after it burned, he was on the front lawn.”

“I don’t know if it was him for sure or not, but he did disappear for a while,” Terry continued as he reached out to touch Angela’s arm. “When he got home that night, he removed a shredded partially burnt shirt. His arm underneath bore a scar. He went in to take a shower, and when he came out there was nothing wrong with his arm.”

Angela looked up at the house, “What are we going to do?”

Terry remained quiet for a minute. “I don’t know. I honestly don’t know.”

“He wouldn’t harm us, would he?” she asked, “I mean, he’s still my brother. How could my own brother harm me?”

“He can’t steal your soul like the dolls, but he can do anything that a person without a conscience can dream up. That could be quite a lot.”

“I can’t imagine my brother harming me. Yet, I’m afraid of him sometimes, but not all the time. But sometimes he has that god-awful look in his eye. I don’t want to have to live in fear of someone I love. But what can I do?”

Hayden stepped out on the porch. “Hey, my man, you made it to the party.”

As Terry walked away, he turned to Angela and said, “Watch your back.”

Hayden came over and slapped hands with Terry. “What’s that?” Hayden asked.

“Nothing.”

Angela stepped into the front room and spied Lynette covered in pink liquid and saw the argument in progress. “Lynette, you’ve been into my strawberry shampoo,” she said.

“I have not.”

“Yes, you have. It’s all over you.”

“Will you help you sister. She doesn’t know Christine well enough to trust her yet.”

“I’ll go take care of the mess in the bathroom,” Christine said.

Angela nodded, “Come with me. I’ll get you into something dry.”

Angel explained to Lynette while she was changing her clothes, “You must not be afraid of the dolls. Terry told me that if you show great courage and poke out their eyes, they are powerless to do you any harm. So get mad at them. Yell at them. Go for the eyes. Poke them out. If you don’t do it, they’ll get you.”

Lynette looked at her sister with big saucer eyes.

“This time when they corner you, you must say, ‘No, leave me alone,’ and tell them to get away from you. If the dolls come at your face, get those eyes and yank them out.

“I don’t think I can.”

“You just have to be brave. Are you brave?”

“Not yet. But I’ll try. The next time the dolls try to take me, I’m going to fight real hard.”

When the girls came back downstairs Christine and Hayden were hanging up the remainder of the balloons that were left over from Lynette’s party. A few broken streamers hung here and there. Angela went in and sat across from her mother, while Lynette curled up next to her mom.

“I know this isn’t going to be the best birthday you’ve ever had or that you will ever have, but we’re going to celebrate it anyway.”

“Okay.”

“Your dad will bring home some goodies. I didn’t get you a present, well, you can see why, so I’m going to give you some cash instead. As soon as you can go into town, you can buy whatever you want.”

“That’s fine.”

Angela looked around at the half-blown-up balloons that were drooping around the room. She felt like the party was already over. Somebody else had experienced it, because she just knew she’d missed it already.

“You already have the bracelet that you dad got for you.”

Angela smiled and twirled it around her wrist. “Yes, I like it very much.”

“I guess it was a good thing that he gave it to you early after all.”

Sheila looked at Hayden, “Do you have the camera ready?”

Hayden pulled the camera from the pocket of his fresh new jeans and showed it to his mom.

“Great! We’ll be needing to get a few family photos after a while.”

“When is dad coming home?” Angela asked.

“He’s not working today. He took off to pick me up and to help us get settled back in the house. He wouldn’t miss your birthday for the world.”

Dad came bursting through the door all chipper, carrying the cake and a bag of ice cream. He’d invited Mrs. Johnson to stay for dinner and was hurrying about getting the table set up.

It wasn’t long before the Mrs. Johnson arrived with her baby. She’d rented a motel room while their house lay in disrepair. Phil Johnson was at the hospital. No one was certain about what happened. Somehow, he ended up at the hospital and wouldn’t be released until later this afternoon.

Gala, Angela and Lynette went out to the back and stayed away from the house while the others were putting everything in it proper place.

After a while James came to the door and called.

“Angela, we’re ready for the birthday girl.”

Angela came in first, followed by Lynette and Gala. James started the singing, “Happy birthday to you . . .” Everyone else joined in.

Angela appreciated the attention that the party gave her, but she wanted to go home more now than she did when she first came to Gainesville. She closed her

eyes and wished privately, took a deep breath, and blew out all the candles by herself.

The family clapped and hollered, “Yeah!”

Christine did the honors of serving the cake and ice cream. Hayden helped her. He’d never been interested in doing anything in the kitchen before, but now, he was like a little bee buzzing about the kitchen, seeing how much trouble he could get into. But it wasn’t trouble at all. He even washed dishes and cleaned up the messes as soon as they appeared.

Sheila lay down for a nap after finishing her cake. She’d taken some pills for pain that put her to sleep right away.

Mrs. Johnson’s phone rang. She spoke on it for a short time and then said, “I’m going to have to pick up Phil. I’ll see you guys later.”

“Nonsense!” James said. “I’ll drive out and get him.”

“I may need to sign some papers.”

“Very well, I’ll drive you out, and we’ll both pick him up.”

“Fine,” she said as she snatched her purse and picked up baby Phil.

‘What a birthday. They came. They ate cake, and now they’re gone.’

Angela looked at her friends sitting there devouring the cake and wondered what she could do to liven up the party.

“Let’s play Big Bootie,” she suggested.

The kids nodded and as soon as they finished eating they sat in a circle on the floor. Angela said, “It’s my birthday, so I get to be Big Bootie.” They



numbered off and Angela started the game, “Ohhh Big Bootie, Big Bootie, Big Bootie, Big Bootie Big Bootie, Big Bootie to the one . . . .

After a couple of rounds of this game, Sheila was wide awake. She rolled her eyes scathingly over at the kids, who had formed their circle not far from her. “Can’t you take the party outside?” she asked as she tried to adjust her broken leg. “I don’t want to spoil all the fun, but I don’t feel very well just now.”

The kids went out on the porch. It was shaded out there, and it wasn’t uncomfortable for them at all. Later they went out to the yard and played a game of ‘Yah.’

After that Terry said, “I’ve got to go now. I have a game in a couple of hours.”

“That’s too bad,” Hayden said.

“Do you want to come with me?”

Hayden looked at his sister and then at Christine, “No. It’s Angela’s birthday. I think there are going to be a few more surprises.”

“Fine, I’ll catch you tomorrow.”

Hayden, Christine and Angela went back in the house. Sheila was fast asleep. Christine tiptoed over to her, “I think she’s knocked out.”

Hayden laughed. The kids lounged around the house for a while snacking and drinking the juice.

“Let’s go to the basement and play some spooky games,” Hayden suggested. Christine nodded and the two of them descended the stairs.

“I’m not going down there, it’s creepy,” Angela said as she backed away.

“What’s that matter with you?” Christine asked as she glanced back over her shoulder. “Scared?”

“No,” Angela said. She didn’t want to think about what it was like the last time she was down there, about the doll and how disturbing that day had been. But she didn’t want the others to think she was scared, so she said, “It’s so beautiful outside. Why would anyone want to be in a basement on such a beautiful day?”

Gala tossed her head to one side, “Perhaps you haven’t noticed. It’s getting hot outside; maybe it would be nice and cool down there.” She got up and started down the steps.

Angela didn’t want to be left alone on her birthday while all the other kids were having fun, so she reluctantly descended the stairs.

She could see the enlarged silhouettes of Hayden and Christine against the wall as they gazed silently through the flame. Angela thought about how stiff and cold they appeared to be. It all seemed too eerie, too inappropriate. Angela saw a doll lying not far from the bottom step and knew that she could not be at peace with that doll staring at her. She snatched the doll and tossed it into a dark corner.

“What did you do that for?” Gala asked as she took a seat at the table next to Christine.

“She was staring at me,” Angela answered. “I just can’t take that. I can’t.”

Angela sat down between Christine and Hayden, across from Gala. Lynette climbed up on her lap. Hayden and Christine hadn’t broken their icy stare. They just kept looking into nothing as if something were there.

Angela thought about the encounter they'd had the other day with the dolls. She thought of dolls, walking stiffly through the house the day they attacked Hayden, and remembered dreaming that she was surrounded by dolls.

She had the feeling that she was once again trapped and tied up in her bed linens. Though the place had changed, the feeling was the same. She could feel their presence surrounding her and tried to wake up. But she was not asleep. She looked behind her and saw nothing but darkness. For a moment she thought she saw a doll scurrying across the room. She sat up stiffly, her hair pricked on the back of her neck. She began to cough and realized that the room seemed warm, much too warm. She jumped out of the chair and darted upstairs with Lynette close behind.

"What's the matter with you?" Gala asked as she poked her head out the basement door.

"It's just too scary down here," Angela said as she hugged Lynette, who was trembling. "It reminds me of the fire."

"Come back down here. Christine is going to tell fortunes in a minute."

Lynette ran to Sheila's side and climbed up on the sofa next to her.

Angela shook her head and said, "No!"

A few minutes later down in the basement, the candle rolled off the table to the other side of the room. "Get out! You've got to get out! The house is on fire," Christine screamed. Gala hurried up the staircase. "Crawl! You've got to crawl out!" Gala rushed to the front door.

Christine and Hayden came upstairs laughing. They joined Gala on the porch. Neither one of them could keep a straight face, and they continued with their big belly laugh.

Angela strolled outside with the others.

“You two were so scared!” Christine said.

“It’s a joke?” Gala screamed. “How could you do that after my house just burned?”

Christine was trying to squelch the laughter. “How could I?” Laughter broke out again between the ornery duo. “How could I not?”

“I hate you! Do you hear me? I hate you Christine!” Gala started crying and pulled away to a chair on the side of the porch to cry. Hayden and Christine sat down in the swing and giggled a while. Angela sat across from them trying to think of what she should do.

When the laughter died down, Angela said, “That was cruel. We barely escaped with our lives, and you two are making a joke of it.”

The duo looked at each other, and Christine pulled a table between them, “Come on, give me your hand. I want to tell your fortune.”

“Again?” Angela sounded less enthusiastic than expected. But she placed her hand on the table, and Christine pulled a scarf over her head.

“You need to tell me something,” Christine said. “What do you want? What do you see in your immediate future?”

“I want my life back. The only way my life can get better,” Angela said, “would be if we were to go back home. I want to go back to our home in Dallas. I

don't want to live out here in this dead land in this dead country. I want to go home to live and love with the same kind of happiness that I knew in the past. I don't want to be out here any more. I don't want to ever look at another doll. I want to be free. Do you see that in my future?"

"Ah, but Angela, we are never free, none of us. We're never free."

Angel stood and slammed her hand down on the table. "I don't want to play this stupid game anymore." She looked harshly at Christine. For a moment it seemed as if she could see a green light emanating from out Christine's eyes, and Angela wondered whether she too could be one of them, one of the dolls.

Gala stepped up next to Angela, caught her by the arm and said, "Let's go in for a while. It's getting much too warm out here."

They went into the kitchen and pulled out the ice cream, loaded up a couple of bowls, and sat down. "I think that joke they played on us was way out of line," Gala said. "I can't believe they'd be so cruel and then laugh about it."

"I guess they didn't mean anything by it."

"I'm not going to speak to Christine for a very long time. I'm really mad at her."

Christine came into the room to dish out some ice cream for herself. Gala finished her ice cream and left just as Hayden was coming in.

Angela got up and gathered up the balloons that were left. She made a big balloon bouquet of them and carried them to her room. She wanted to look at it all week. She'd done this ever since she was little, gathering the balloons at first just

because her mom wanted them out of the way. But now, it had become a tradition, keeping balloons until they wilted naturally.

When she came back downstairs, Hayden greeted her, singing out in a musical tone, "It's time for you to open your birthday present."

"Oh, I forgot about that."

"No, you can't forget," Christine said as she stuffed ice cream in her mouth, "It'll be the best part of the day."

Hayden wrapped a blindfold around Angela's head.

"Hey, what are you doing?" she protested.

"It's a surprise," he said, "a big birthday surprise." He escorted her out to the porch, then twirled her around in a circle.

Angela stumbled whichever way he pushed her, as she could not see a thing. Suddenly, someone else's hands were upon her, helping Hayden with the spinning. "Stop, I'm getting dizzy!" she protested, but they continued to spin her around for a few more turns.

Two kids took hold of her and guided her down the steps and off into the distance. Angela could feel the heat from the sun and soon realized that Hayden and Christine were the only ones with her, one on each side of her. This wasn't the birthday she'd wanted. As much as she liked the idea of getting a special present, she didn't want to go anywhere with these two people, but they didn't give her a choice. They guided her out to the pond.

Once they were there, Hayden gave her a string. "Now follow that string to your present," he said.

“You can’t remove the blindfold until you have your hands on the box,” Christine added.

Angela sighed. She stumbled around following the string. A couple of times she almost fell. She could hear them snickering in the background. The ground was sloping, and she wondered whether they’d placed her present in the pond. She bent down to see if the ground was wet and felt a bunch of grass, so she knew she was probably in a very different spot from the one she’d imagined. Finally, when she did come to the end of the string, her present was on the top of the picnic table in plain view. She placed her hands on it and squealed, “Done!” She snatched off her blindfold and began tearing at the purple paper wrapping.

Christine and Hayden sat down at the table to watch. Angela ripped off the purple lid and a wiggling squirming corn silk doll sat up and glared at her with her human eyes. Angela jumped back in horror. Her face had gone ashen as she looked at Hayden and Christine, who were sitting over at the side laughing.

“Well, what did you expect?” Hayden cackled. “You didn’t think we’d forget about you, did you.”

“What are you trying to do to me?” Angela snatched the little doll out by the arm and threw her to the middle of the pond.

Hayden held his hands up and motioned for her to calm down. “It’s okay, we aren’t doing this because we don’t like you. It’s just that it’s better this way.”

“Yes,” Christine added in, “all of us together, all of us as one.”

“Have you gone mad?”

“No, you don’t understand. This life after the fact is not so bad,” Hayden explained. “We were like you in the beginning. We wanted to be free of the dolls. We weren’t willing to sacrifice ourselves to this being. But, you see, the dolls aren’t here to harm you. They are here to take away your burdens and make your life better.”

“More livable, if you will.”

“How? How can they? They want to suck away my soul.”

“Can that be so wrong?” Christine asked. “It’s not as bad as all that.”

“I don’t want to give them my soul. It belongs to me. They can’t take it.”

Christine snickered, “Yes, they can.”

“I don’t want that to happen to me.”

“It’s not so bad, really,” Christine said as she pushed away from the table.

“My life hasn’t changed that much.”

“Once it’s over you’ll wonder why you resisted so long,” Hayden said as he waved his healed arm before her. “If you get hurt, you’ll heal faster. Why, you’ll even feel better.”

“You’ll have more physical strength,” Christine said and she added, “more purpose in life. Look, even my old scar has disappeared.” Christine held her hair back from her forehead. “You’ll have a better idea of who you are and what you’re to become.”

Angela thought about what they said. Perhaps they were right. Hayden had never steered her wrong before. And it was obvious to her that there had been many improvements in him since the attack. His arm did heal quickly, and he



didn't ever have any pain. Perhaps that type of life would be good for her too. Perhaps she should give in. 'How bad could it be?' she thought, 'Here they are. Both Christine and Hayden seem pretty normal, so grown up. What have I been so frightened of? Growing up?'

"It won't hurt to lose my soul?" she asked.

"No, there is no pain. I promise," Christine insisted. "Only for a moment, then never again. You'll see."

Angela could see little flickers of green light in Christine's eyes. She rolled her eyes over to Hayden and saw the same thing. 'That's not natural, not a human characteristic at all,' she thought.

Angela wanted to believe. She wanted never to feel pain. She wanted to grow up and to be better than she was. Perhaps this would be a good way to accomplish it. 'I'll not die,' she thought. She looked at Hayden and then Christine and considered what they were saying. "So you think this is for the best?"

"Yes, you'll see. The outside world won't seem so annoying to you anymore. You won't worry. You won't care about the trouble of this world or the pain that other people are enduring. You'll only be focused on yourself," Christine rested her head on the table, looking Angela in the eye. "It's a better life. It really is."

That was the deciding factor. Angela didn't want to be focused on herself always. "What if I want to care about other people? I love Lynette. Will I not love her anymore? And what about mom and dad? I love all of you, but you don't love me?"

“Not anymore. You’re better off without those types of constraints,” Hayden insisted as he leaned against a tree. “I don’t mean that there isn’t some concern. It’s just that it’s weaker than it was. Besides, we all have one purpose, one mind, one mission.”

“What might that be?”

“To make the world a better place,” Christine winked at Hayden. “We are not encumbered by the little feelings and emotions that disrupt our everyday lives any more. You’ll like it once it happens. Come on. Give it a try.”

Angela thought, ‘Could they be right? Will giving your soul to the little dolls lead to a better life?’ She wanted a better life.

She asked, “But if I don’t like it, I can never go back to normal?”

“Is that such an awful price?” Hayden asked. “It’s not as if you’re going to go out and become some sort of monster now, is it? You’ll still like ice cream and cake. You’ll still be flesh and blood.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Angela spied Gala, who was on the other side of the pond watching, and wondered whose side she was on.

“Yes, flesh that heals faster and suffers less harm,” Christine added.

“But without a soul?”

“What is a soul anyway?” Hayden asked. “You can’t see it or feel it. Who’s going to miss it?”

“Not you,” Christine added. “I don’t miss mine.”

Angela looked at them and back at the doll that had come out of the water and was advancing toward her. She considered for a moment. Perhaps they were

right, "I suppose I could consider it," she said. She took the little doll up in her hands and looked at it, then back at her friends. "I don't want to be forced into anything. It wouldn't be so bad if I were free to choose and to do it on my own. Could you give me a few minutes to think about it?"

They looked at each other. Then turned to look back at her. "You've escaped it so far," Christine said. "I don't see any reason why you can't wait just a little longer. Remember, it's our gift to you. One of the best gifts you'll ever have."

Angela looked down at the doll that hopped up on the table and looked up at her with those human eyes. That's when she knew. She looked up at her comrades and said, "No, I want to be me. I want to be me no matter how many faults I have. I want to keep myself clean from this miserable, unnatural act."

The doll sprang off the table and fixed itself to Angela's shoulder as she tried to get away. Angela ran away from the table and struggled with the doll while Christine and Hayden lay on the ground laughing at her.

Remembering what Terry had told her, she knew what she had to do. Angela grabbed the doll's legs and pulled as hard as she could. With a pop, she'd pulled her face free from the soul-sucking doll. She didn't think she could actually look at a human eye and snatch it out, but she knew what she had to do. There was no other way. Angela moved to get in a better position for the task and stepped in a hole, falling flat on her face.

The doll jumped on her back and pulled at Angela's hair. Angela tried to pull herself up. The doll slid around toward Angela's face and tried to attach itself

again. Angela pushed the doll against the ground and crawled toward a tree. When she got there, she shoved the doll against the tree. The doll squealed loudly.

The laughing behind her ceased. “Stop that,” Hayden yelled. “You can’t do that.”

Christine grabbed the tree in front of her and leaned in as her smile faded. “Accept your fate. It’s not a problem really. You’ll be better off.”

“No!” Angela yelled. “This is not for me!”

Angela held her hand back as far as she could and with a huge lung she poked her hand into the creature’s eye.

It squealed in pain.

“Stop it! Don’t!” Christine said as she raced toward them. “You can’t do that! Don’t!”

Angela dug as deep as she could at the doll’s eye, securing her fingers around the slippery eyeball. She could feel the tissue squish between her fingers. When she got a good grip, she snatched out its eye. Blood spurted up in Angela’s face. Blood and juices covered her hands as she held the eye in front of her.

One long nerve dangled from the eye, still connected to the doll. Angela secured the doll on the ground with her foot as she took her other hand and snatched the remaining tissue loose. The doll cried out in pain while Angela tossed the eye to one side.

Suddenly, other dolls were every where. Christine and Hayden started stumbling around as if they had suddenly been blinded. It was as if they’d been lost in a dark cloud and couldn’t reorient themselves.

Several dolls lunged at Angela, knocking her down. Once again, the doll with one remaining eye attacked Angela and began sucking her breath away. She tried to pull the doll away, but the doll was attached more firmly than ever before. Angela's breath was leaving her. She pulled with all her might and rolled over on the doll. She pressed down on its body with both hands and used her knees to pull herself up. She stretched her head toward the sky and the doll popped loose.

Another doll attacked Angela from behind, causing her to lose her grip on the one-eyed doll. Angela tossed the other doll off her back and raced after the one doll whose eye she'd already extracted. The doll tripped over a branch, and with a final lunge Angela dived at the doll and caught it.

She snatched the doll up in her bloody hand. The doll squealed as Angela shoved the doll against the ground and grabbed at the other eye. She got a grip on the squishy mess and pulled with all her might. A suction noise sounded as Angela pulled the eye free. She looked at the eyeball in her hand. It still looked human. The very thought of holding a human eyeball repulsed her. She tossed that eyeball into the pond.

The other dolls surrounded the pond and watched the eye as it landed in the water. By the time Angela took her first steps toward the pond, they'd all scattered out of sight.

She glanced across the ground at the other eye that she'd snatch out. It was still lying in the dirt several feet away and seemed to be glaring at her. Angela raced toward the first eye. She picked up the tissue with the eye dangling from it and tossed it in the pond as well.

Hayden and Christine looked on in horror. When Angela raised her head to look them in the eye, Christine grabbed Hayden's arm and the two of them started stumbling back toward the house.

Gala had walked around the pond. The two girls looked down at the wretched doll at their feet. Its face was no longer bloody. It had no face at all, but looked just as it had the day Angela came to the house.

## Chapter 18

Four weeks later as the family was driving home. James drove the old pickup with the 'For Sale' sign attached to the back window. Terry sat in the front of the Entourage with Sheila. Angela and Lynette sat in the back.

Angela pulled a bottle of hand sanitizer out of her purse. She squirted the liquid out to wash her hands. No matter how much she cleaned, she could still see blood on her hands, with an eyeball in the middle of them.

Sheila looked at her in the rear view mirror and remarked. "Stop it. Stop the cleaning already. You don't want to dry out you hands."

"I know. There just so dirty, so very dirty."

"That's the fifth time you've cleaned your hands in an hour."

"I know."

“You’ve been doing that for a month now,” Sheila continued. “It’s time to quit.”

Angela tucked the bottle in her purse, while Lynette crawled over the back seat and began playing with the bouquet of balloons they’d bought for her at the last stop.

Hayden looked at Angela out of the corner of his eye and grinned. He covered his head with a ball cap and pretended to be asleep.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop! In back of the vehicle, Lynette burst all the balloons with a pin from one of the dolls. With the last stab, she punctured her own finger and squealed. Blood dripped over her fingers as she stretched her hand over the seat.

Sheila looked back at her. “Angela, would you take care of that?” she pointed at her purse and said. “Hayden get her a baby wipe. The Band-Aid and Neosporin are in my purse.”

Hayden snatched out a baby wipe and handed it to Angela, “Here.”

Angela took it and turned to her sister. Lynette placed her finger in front of Angela who started wiping away the blood. She searched for the cut, but couldn’t see where the skin was broken. A queasy feeling raced down her spine as she thought, ‘No, she can’t be.’

She looked into Lynette’s eyes. A flicker of green light met her own.