

The
Ghost Files
Books 1-3

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Book One.

The Haunted Highway

Prologue

The silver Volvo edged forwards cautiously. She hated driving in the dark; it always made her uneasy and she had to concentrate on the car's headlights that cut through the gloom like a knight in shining armour, illuminating the way home.

"Mom, I've lost Freddie." Her son's whining voice cut through her focus. She glanced to her right to see him stuffing his hands down the side of the passenger seat. His bright blue eyes looked into hers with a sad desperation. Freddie was a marble that James, his father, had given him right before the plane crash that had claimed his life, since then their son had refused to let it out of his sight.

"Hold on." She told him taking her right hand off the wheel, she tried to locate the small ball. Something cold brushed against her skin and she tried to grasp it but only succeeded in pushing it further out of reach. "Damn it." Taking her eyes off the road for a second she leaned over and finally felt her hand wrap around the marble. "Got it." She cried out with just a touch of triumph to her voice.

"Mom look out!" Something ran across the road in front of the car and she yanked on the wheel hard, the Volvo careened to the left where another set of headlights lit up the inside of the little car like the fourth of July. She tried to accelerate but lost control and met the oncoming vehicle head on.

The blare of the Volvo's horn echoed through the frosty night air, by the road side a doe surveyed the mangle of metal before springing off into the dark wood.

Chapter One

Kelly road, Ohio Ville, Pennsylvania, present day

Kay South turned up the radio and sang along to Michael Jackson's Thriller. "So how did we do?" She asked glancing at the pirate in the passenger seat.

"We're loaded!" Tyler exclaimed gazing down at the bag full of candy. "We have to go there every Halloween." Kay couldn't help but laugh. Against her better judgement she had agreed to suspend tradition and finally take her son to her bosses Halloween party. It hadn't been as bad as she had thought; with his wife there her boss had kept his perverted behaviour to a minimum, and Tyler had really enjoyed bobbing for apples and raiding the bowls of candy.

"Okay, that's enough sugar for you young man."

"Aw mum!"

"Don't aw mum me, you'll never get to sleep with all those e numbers pumping through your system, put the candy in the glove compartment, now." Grudgingly Tyler obeyed.

"Toby's mum lets him eat as much as he likes." He grumbled, trying to sneak one out the bag before shutting it away. Kay grabbed it and tried to wrestle it away, while still keeping her eyes on the road.

"Tyler!"

"Just one more please!" Kay sighed and fixed him with her best scowl. Her mother was always banging on about being more assertive, that children ran ragged without a father figure in their life, and maybe she had a point. Kay gave into Tyler so much and she didn't want him growing up being bratty, so she decided to put her foot down.

"No, now put it back...now Tyler!" He unwrapped it and popped it into his mouth, Kay was just about to give him an ear full when out of nowhere a horn sounded, darting her eyes back to the road she gasped.

Headlights turned on high blinded her and she had no choice but to look away. "Mum...!" Tyler screamed as she gripped the wheel trying madly to get them out of this lunatic's path. She lost control and the car darted off the road and down a steep embankment.

Tyler screamed clinging onto her sweater which only restricted her movements more and a solid looking tree appeared in front of them.

Kay knew it was hopeless and stopped fighting with the wheel, grabbing Tyler, she braced for impact.

Kay South slowly opened her eyes. At first everything was fuzzy and indistinct like looking down at the bottom of a swimming pool. "Tyler..." She moaned stretching out a hand to pat the seat beside her. It was empty.

Jerking her head up, ignoring the stinging pain, Kay's frantic eyes searched the interior of the car. Tyler was nowhere to be found. Pure terror seized her and it was only then she realized the passenger side door was open, had he been flung from the wreckage? Maybe the door had swung open on impact; maybe Tyler was okay and had gone for help...all this flashed through her mind within seconds.

Kay tore at the seat belt release and kicked the door open, the world spun and she clung to the remains of the door till the dizziness passed. The front of the car was a total write off, folded up like an accordion, tendrils of smoke rose from the smashed grill like ghostly fingers.

"Tyler!" Kay searched the dark wood that surround the road, but couldn't see more than a few yards. The slivery light of the moon couldn't pierce the dense foliage and left her enveloped in darkness. "Tyler!" it was no use, wherever her son was he couldn't hear her. Staggering back to the car she searched for her purse, it had fallen off the back seat and its contents spewed over the floor. She grabbed her cell phone which mercifully was unscathed, then cursed out loud when there was no signal. Kay had to get help; she was probably concussed and somewhere out in the vast wilderness was her seven year old son.

Slowly climbing her way up the bank aided by old exposed tree roots, Kay reached the road and held up the phone. Still nothing. The sound of a distant car reached her ears and without hesitation she ran into the road, flapping her hands in the air like a crazed lunatic.

Headlights rounded the bend and she almost cried with relief when the car slowed and pulled to a stop.

A young girl with long dark hair got out and ran over to her. "Are you okay? What happened?" The effort had been too much and nausea hit Kay like a fist, she bent over and tried to calm herself by taking deep breaths. "We were ran off the road..." she panted. "My son is missing." "Where did you crash?" A guy asked, appearing at their side with a flashlight, Kay pointed and he took off.

"Please, you have to find him." Kay pleaded, clinging onto the girl, "he's never even been camping". She made to follow the man but instead stumbled across the tarmac and would have fell if the girl hadn't caught her.

"Maybe you should sit down for a while." Kay struggled to stay vertical and shook her head.

"I have to find Tyler." The girl still didn't release her.

"At least let me take care of your wounds," the girl said, "your no use to your son dead, don't worry Sam's looking for him, trust me if he's out there my brother will find him." Kay reluctantly agreed and let the girl lead her to the Chevy.

She sat down on the passenger seat and faced sideways so the girl could get to her easily. Cold

droplets of rain started to fall and her fear for Tyler grew. The girl dug around in the trunk and returned with a first aid kit, she must have saw Kay examining it because she gave her a smile. "It's always better to be prepared." She flicked it open and took out some cotton wool buds which she soaked with water from a bottle, setting it down she gently pushed back Kay's matted brown hair and dabbed at a gash on her forehead.

"I tried to call for help," Kay offered, "but I didn't have a signal, do you?" The girl shook her head. "This place is a proverbial black hole I'm afraid." Kay looked up at her as she dressed her wound. She looked to be in her early twenties and very pretty with cascading hair and honest round almond eyes.

"Are you from around here?" She asked her, the girl shook her head.

"New York. Me and my brother are road tripping. Okay, that's the best I can do for now. You'll probably need stitches."

"Thank you." Kay said getting to her feet; she felt more like herself but her voice still trembled as did her hands. The girl noticed and pulled out a candy bar from her coat pocket.

"Here eat this, you'll feel better. I'm Star West and this guy here is my brother Sam." Kay turned to see the guy crossing the road towards them. Her heart throbbed when she realized he was alone. He was smoking hot with high cheekbones, full lips and rain dripping dark hair, in different circumstances Kay would have defiantly hit on him, but all she could think about was Tyler out there all alone, at least she hoped he was. It sucked that that was the best case scenario. "Find anything?" Star asked him, which struck Kay as a stupid question; they could plainly see that he was alone. He regarded Kay with weary eyes before he answered in a rough and ragged voice. "There's no sign of the boy, it's like he's just disappeared, no tracks in the mud...nothing."

"But he has to be out there..." Kay cried and felt them both study her.

"This other car that ran you off the road," Sam said slowly, "what did it look like?" Kay stared at him.

"What does that have to do with finding Tyler...?" She gasped as it dawned on her what Sam was implying. "You don't think they took my son, do you?" He shrugged dismissively.

"I don't think anything; it's just strange that the only tracks I see is yours." He shined the flashlight on to the road's slick surface and sure enough there were her tire tracks, but none from the other vehicle. Lightning lit up the sky above them and Kay felt a cold shiver travel down her spine.

"I swear..." She breathed.

"It's okay; we're just going to have to look harder, is all." Star said casting Sam an irritated glance. She took Kay's hands in hers. "We will find him, I promise." Kay got the uneasy feeling that she was missing something but all she could focus on was getting Tyler back. That was all that mattered. "Come on." Star squeezed her hand reassuringly before the sound of an approaching car caught her attention. Kay ran to flag it down, maybe their cell phones worked, or they could

go get help while she stayed here and searched for Tyler, Kay was determined she wasn't leaving this damn road without her son. Sam caught her arm and held her back.

"Look at your watch." He ordered his sister. Star pushed up her coat sleeve and stiffened. She looked at them with foreboding until Sam instructed her to get off the road.

"What are you doing?" Kay shouted at him, trying to yank away from his grasp, "it's just another passing car, they can help us." Sam looked at her and there was pity in his dark eyes.

"Another car or the same car that ran you off the road?" The vehicle was right around the bend and would become visible in just a few seconds. "You were lucky we were driving past, but another so soon? This road doesn't actually connect to any motorway." His words made her head spin, why would they come back?

"Guys!" Star called out to them motioning to the road. Kay turned to see blinding headlights bearing down on them. She screamed and tried to flee but Sam held her to him and swung them around, putting his body in between her and the oncoming car. Kay braced herself for the second time that night and waited to die. Freezing numbing coldness seemed to sink into her very bones but there was no impact, just an icy sensation that made her teeth rattle.

Sam's grip on her lessened and she looked up to see an empty road. "What the..."

"Sam!" Star shouted again and Kay turned just in time to see him launch into the air. He cleared her head and landed hard on the tarmac a good fair few feet away. Kay found herself staring into a pale face with rooting teeth and a terrible grin etched onto thin chapped lips. She recoiled as he reached out for her.

"Star help me!" She screamed as his cold fingers snaked around her wrist. He said nothing but bored into her with dead eyes.

"Stop!" Star yelled and Kay glanced away from his pock marked face to see her stooped beside her unconscious brother. "Please," she pleaded with Kay's captor. "I can help you, don't take her..." and that was all Kay heard before darkness came.

Chapter Two

Star West slapped her brother awake. They didn't have time to sleep. Sam's eyelids fluttered but didn't open, she moved to slap him again but with cat like reflexes he caught her hand, and she let out a breath of relief. "Stop hitting me woman, I'm awake." He told her before groggily getting to his feet.

"About time, I've been slapping you for the last ten minutes." She mused. "I thought you were supposed to be tough." He stretched and grimaced.

"Yeah well, you try being catapulted through the air by a ghost; let's see how well you fair." He shot back. "I take it he took her."

"Yes." Star said with bitterness. "We only have till midnight to stop this thing Sam, or we'll have to go through the whole thing again next Halloween."

"We'll find her Star." He told her softly before collecting the flashlight, the fall had busted the bulb and Sam tossed it away with an annoyed growl.

"Did you find the house while you were out there?" She asked him.

"Think so, it's about a mile away, with any luck we'll find her there, let's get going." He locked the Chevy up and they took off through the woods. The thing that struck them the most as they ventured into the blackness was the silence. Not a single hoot of an owl, or rustlings of animals could be heard, not even gusts of wind that had picked up quickly, penetrated the eerie woods. Sam stopped and handed her a pair of binoculars equipped with night vision, that he had extracted from the trunk of the Chevy, he pointed out a faint light in the distance, following it

Star made out through the scopes a rundown farmhouse a few yards ahead. "That has to be it." He whispered as she handed the binoculars back. They had scoured every newspaper article they could find about the tragedy but none gave the exact location of the house, they had only a brief grid reference to work with, but the house fitted the story.

An agonized scream filled the air. "That's her." Star hissed stalking ahead. Sam caught up to her and tugged on her arm.

"Let's be smart about this, I don't want him getting the best of us twice. I'll try and get him away, you wait till he's took the bait before rescuing her, clear?" Star nodded and watched him move ahead. From the sound of the scream it seemed to have come from the tattered barn that sat off to the right of the house, it should been easy to get to once Sam had the ghost occupied. It still amazed her how this all seemed the norm. After the car crash that claimed their parents and had left her and Sam fighting for life, things were different; coming back from the brink of death had changed something. They had glimpsed a world that only the dead should see, and as a result they could communicate with and see the dead.

The screams died away and Star took this to be her cue, as silently as she could Star made her way up to the barn. A commotion reached her ears and she froze, Sam came crashing through the mouldy wood of the building and landed in a thorn bush a few meters away.

Star threw herself behind a large tree trunk and didn't dare breathe, despite everything movies told you ghosts were very corporeal and they had the strength of an elephant, particularly this one as it was cold hard vengeance that fuelled it. Guns, iron, salt were all useless. The only thing that could hurt them were the secrets they fought so hard to hide, the unfinished business that kept them from the light... or the fire.

Star dared to peep out and saw Sam get to his feet, only to be thrown on his ass again, "come on Sam." She breathed; her watch had stopped at ten past nine, whenever you encountered the dead time froze. This ghost was packing some serious heat and they had to resolve him quickly and to do that they needed Kay.

Sam had he's complete attention so Star bolted across the grass to the barn. He would have probably sensed her but they didn't have the luxury of time. Kay was shackled to the ceiling looking utterly terrorized and spent, blood was running from multiple cuts and Star signalled for her to be quite while she looked for something to break Kay's bonds.

The chains were as old as her grandfather and broke with a few pounds of a hammer she found nearby. The ghost definitely knew she was here now, supporting Kay she hurried out the barn and practically had to drag the woman over to the house. A stiff kick granted them entry and Star set Kay onto the dirty wooden floor while securing the door. She heard a door slam at the back of the house and hoped it was Sam.

After pulling numerous decaying furniture over the door, she scooped up a shaking Kay and guided her to a room to their left, Sam followed close behind. "That should keep him busy for a

while, but we need to hurry.” He helped Star deposit Kay onto the floor and propped her up against the wall. “I’m sorry sis but we haven’t got time for this touchy feely crap, we have to do it my way.”

“Just go easy.” Star warned before moving to the cracked window and looking out.

“What does he want...?” Kay whispered as silent tears rolled down her cut cheeks. Sam exchanged a look with his sister before sitting crossed legged in front of her.

“You.” Kay just stared at him with blank eyes.

“What...? I don’t understand...” Star heard him sigh and gently pushed him out the way.

“Go search the house for anything useful.” She ordered him. Star loved her brother more than anything but he wasn’t much good at showing empathy. Throwing her a scowl he left. The house was gutted, scorch marks were still present on many of the walls and there was a burnt smell lingering in the air.

“The man’s name is Giles Peterson, this used to be his house.” Kay just stared at her with frustrated confusion.

“I don’t care; I just want my son...” She started to cry and Star tried a different approach. “What do you know about ghosts Kay?” This stopped her tears at least.

“You people are crazy...” Star smiled.

“We get that a lot.” She admitted. “But believe it or not they are real. Me and my brother were involved in an accident two years ago, we nearly died. Upon waking in a hospital bed I had a conversation with my mother,” Star trailed off as she remembered her mother sitting across from her looking flawless with wavy blonde hair and manicured hands. “It wasn’t till a nurse came in to give me my meds, that I realized something was off, you see she couldn’t see her; the poor girl thought I’d gone nuts when I told her I was talking to my mother. She told me that I was mistaken because my parents had died a day earlier in that very hospital.” Kay who had been listening with widening eyes gasped.

“The accident changed us Kay, it’s like we’ve got a foot in both worlds, this one and the after.”

“Are you saying this...Giles is a ghost?” Star nodded solemnly.

“It gets worse.” She said on seeing the pure disbelief on Kay’s pale face. “We didn’t just happen upon you tonight, we were looking for you. You see sometimes the dead can’t crossover or won’t because they feel they can’t leave, something ties them here and until that’s resolved they can never be at peace.” Kay’s eyes darted around as if looking for the quickest way out, she got to her feet slowly, and Star took in her ripped sweater and ruined jeans.

“What does this have to do with me and Tyler?” Star stared at her, grief welled up inside and she forced herself to stay focused.

“Because six years ago on this very patch of road, you killed Giles Peterson.”

Chapter Three

"I've found something." Sam's voice cut through the tension and he stopped at the threshold, darting his eyes back and forth between the two women.

"I don't know who you people are, but I've never killed anyone." Kay's voice shook. Sam got ready to catch her just in case she bolted, but she just leaned against the wall like a deer caught in headlights.

"You didn't mean to." He told her softly. "It was an accident. You and your son were coming back from a Halloween party, your vehicles collided..."

"You're lying! I was at a party tonight; it's the first one we've been too! Why are you doing this to me?" Star stepped forward slowly, making it clear she meant no harm.

"It's the same party Kay; you're stuck in a loop, re-living this night every Hallows eve." Kay's face flashed with anger and she pushed past Star but Sam refused to budge.

"Move!" She commanded, he slowly shook his head. "My son is out there!"

“Actually he’s not Kay.” Star told her. Kay looked at her with fresh tears welling up in her red rimmed eyes.

“What do you mean...”she whispered, “he has to be...” Star’s hand dug around in her jeans pocket and produced a cell phone.

“He’s safe I promise you, Kay he was never here.” Kay swayed precariously and Sam steadied her, she clung to him tightly.

“Stop it.” She pleaded, and Star’s heart ached, but this had to be sorted once and for all. They had to move on.

“Kay he survived the crash six years ago...but you didn’t.” Sam placed Kay back onto the floor and he laid something in front of her, it was a dirty velvet bound book and as Sam opened it Star saw the pale light of the moon shine down through the window onto yellowed newspaper clippings. Kay picked it up and they saw her frantic eyes trail over the pages.

“He was a celebrated crop farmer, he won rosettes and prizes, he was something of a celebrity round here, so his death was well documented.” Sam told her.

“It says here he had a wife and new-born child.” Kay said suddenly looking up at them. Star held out her hand.

“Let me show you something.” Kay hesitated a second then swallowed hard. She let Star lead her outside to an overgrown yard at the end of which was a knarled apple tree, its bounty was still hanging from its branches black and crawling with maggots.

“Ugh.” Kay made to take a step back but Star wouldn’t let her. Beneath the tree was two unmarked headstones.

“Upon Giles’s death his wife soon realized that her husband hadn’t told her everything. He was behind on his mortgage, apparently he had quite the gambling problem. The bank seized the farm a month after he died. She had a three month old daughter to provide for and no one to turn to, so she...smothered her daughter while she was sleeping then hung herself from this very tree.” Kay staggered back horrified. Sam handed her the book and she just made out a small photograph glued to the last page. It showed the man that had tortured her cuddling a pretty redheaded woman with a bundle of blankets cradled in his arms, in the middle of those blankets was a new born wearing a pink dress, they stood under an apple tree with a barn in the background. They looked so happy and in love...

Kay dropped the book onto the ground and stumbled back holding her hands to her face. “After what happened here no one wanted to buy the house, the locals buried the family here under their prized and beloved apples and the house has been left to rot.” Star said sadly. “It was condemned a few weeks ago after kids lit a fire that gutted the place. Now do you understand?” She asked. “We’re trying to help you both move on, it was just a stupid accident with devastating consequences, but playing this out again and again is doing none of you any good. It’s time to let go.”

“Are you saying we do this every...” Images flashed through Kay’s mind, the headlights appearing from nowhere, Tyler screaming for her...

“Halloween. You crash, go looking for your son whom you think is lost in the woods, and Giles captures you and takes out he’s pain on you till the sun comes up.” Sam clarified. “It’s a vicious circle that can’t go on.”

“But Tyler...” Star handed Kay her cell. On the screen was a photo of a boy in his early teens, he had Tyler’s black hair and blue eyes, Kay touched the screen tenderly

“Tyler...”

“He’s been living with your mother for the past six years, he’s just discovered girls and loves to go skate boarding with his friends.” Star told her with a smile. “And still takes Freddie everywhere.”

Kay gasped at the mention of the marble, her son’s most prized object.

“Star, look out!” Sam cried jolting her back to here and now, Kay dropped the phone as Giles appeared behind Star and grabbed her hair, with effortless ease he sent her crashing into the side of the house. She crumpled to the floor in a heap. Sam dashed forwards and wrestled with him only to be flung away like garbage.

“Kay only you can get through to him.” Star yelled trying to get up. At the sound of her voice Giles charged for her but Kay stepped in his path.

“It’s me you want.” She told him and he slowed snarling at her like a wild beast. She looked at Star who smiled at her reassuringly before grimacing, she had pulled herself up but couldn’t put any weight on her left leg. Kay knew what she had to do.

“I know I’ve caused you pain.” She told Giles advancing towards him, he took a step back regarding her with fear. “I never meant to hurt you...it was an accident...just a stupid accident, and because of it I never got to watch my son grow up, and you lost your family...I’m sorry...” Tears spilled down her face and for a second the wind and rain abated, but returned with fury. Giles charged at her with murder in his eyes. Kay felt time slow and shot Star and Sam, who had come to the aid of his sister, a final smile before turning to face the man she had ruined.

“Forgive me...” She whispered. He halted and the rage in his face fell away, they stared at each other until the sun winked down at them from the grey storm clouds that were slowly dissipating. Kay saw tears slide down his cheeks before a smile parted his lips. A soft glow of light settled on him from the heavens and slowly he faded away. Kay stepped back. “What...?”

“He’s at peace.” Star told her making her way over, supported by her brother whom looked worn out. “He’s crossed over.”

“How can I ever repay you?” Kay asked them and Sam smiled showing off his pearly whites. Even covered in cuts and dirt he was still dazzling.

“Tell me what Heaven’s like.” He teased. They all laughed.

“So this is what you do for a living?” She asked them, “helping the dead rest?”

“Kind of.” He answered. “Take care of yourself and enjoy the afterlife.” He started off but when

Kay turned to Star she was frozen to the spot and staring intently beyond the yard at a patch of treeline, straining her eyesight Kay made out a dark figure dressed in black with a hat obscuring his face, chills hit her and she got a feel of something very old and...very bad coming off him.

"Who is he?" She whispered to Star who seemed taken aback by the question.

"You can see him?" Kay nodded looking at her perplexed. "Why?"

"Sam can't." Star answered returning her gaze back to the man but he had vanished.

"Star!" Sam called. "Do I have to drag your ass to the car, it's been a long night, I'm cold tired and hungry not to mention sore, can you stop harassing the poor ghost and let her go to Heaven already!"

"Dick." Star uttered.

"I'd like to be dragged by him any day." Kay mused, she blushed when Star rose her eyebrows at her.

"Now that's ugh worthy." The girls giggled like schoolchildren before embracing warmly.

"Thank you Star for everything, and be careful I got...a bad vibe from that man, stay away from him."

"I'll try." Star said cheerfully but Kay could hear the edge to her voice. A warm feeling enveloped her and Kay looked down at herself to see her insides glowing, Star stepped back as Kay slowly disappeared, replaced by a stunning rainbow and a blooming apple tree.

"Star!" She rolled her eyes.

"I'm coming! Jeez." She yelled back hopping over the rough terrain. All in all it had been a pretty good night, except for nearly being killed. She just wished that her parents, wherever they were, were just as peaceful as Kay and Giles.

Book Two:

The Manor Of Darkness

Prologue

Lord Backwater cleared his throat and raised his glass of red wine, the others that sat round the rectangle Oak table fell silent and waited expectantly. "Here's to..." his deep rich voice trailed off as the lights in the dining room flickered.

The Backwater's guests looked around with confusion. "Probably just the fuse box," Lord

Backwater mused trying to keep the edge from his own voice. "It is old, like everything else in this house." He added under his breath.

"I'll fetch the candles just in case." Mrs Backwater said wiping her mouth on the white napkin before getting to her feet. The lights gave up altogether plunging the house into utter darkness.

"Oh bloody hell..." The Lord cursed, his breath turned to white fog the minute it left the warmth of his mouth.

"It's...freezing..." Lucy Backwater chattered hugging her bare arms as the dining room turned into the North Pole. Frost crawled up the window panes and the Lord cursed his luck, the boiler must have finally packed in.

"My Lord...?" Eliza the housekeeper came in carrying a single lit candle that had been shoved into an empty beer bottle, multiple layers of wax were crusted around the bottle opening, illustrating how frequently the ancient wiring failed.

"It's fine Eliza, hand me the candle I'll go fetch some more from the pantry." Lord Backwater stumbled across the carpeted floor to the old housekeeper.

"So much for the nice homecoming dinner you promised us." Laura Backwater snipped letting her fork clatter onto the full plate of food in front of her.

"Do give it a rest Laura." Mrs Backwater sighed tiredly. "We hardly need your sarcastic comments." Laura threw her mother a sharp hateful glance that thankfully Mrs Backwater couldn't see in the gloom.

Eliza handed over the candle, the lights flashed suddenly then returned. They all let out a cheer as the darkness and cold soaked away. The first thing Lord Backwater did was check on his father who had kept quiet throughout the whole fright. In fact the old man hardly talked at all anymore though he was perfectly capable of it.

He was sitting at the table next to Lucy in his wheelchair with a wool blanket over his lap; he looked as distant as ever. "Well there seems to be no harm done," Lord Backwater said returning to his seat at the head of the table, "let's carry on with the evening shall we? That will be all Eliza."

The whole family froze with sheer terror as an old man dressed in a tailored but outdated suit appeared in the middle of the dining room. He had materialized out of nowhere and Lord Backwater nearly had a heart attack. The mysterious stranger pointed at his father and spoke with a trembling voice. "She's coming. She's coming for you..."

Chapter One

Star West slammed the morning newspaper down onto the desk. She pulled off her brother's ear buds when he refused to look at it. "Hey! I was listening to that!" He squawked trying to grab them back, Star held them out of reach and tossed the newspaper at him.

"Old Backwater passed away last night." Star told him indicating the front page of the Herald. Sam barely glanced at it before casting it aside.

"So? What was he...? Ninety?" Star sighed with frustration; Sam was the only family she had left after the car accident that claimed their parents three years ago. She loved him but he could be a right pain in the ass when he was bored. They hadn't had a case since the Bell gate ghost three weeks ago.

"Eighty two." She snapped shoving the paper back at him. "And it was by no means natural." Finally she had his full attention. His dark eyes regarded her warily before taking the paper and scanning the front page.

"You've got to be kidding me..." He whispered after a few minutes had passed. "The famous Angel crest ghost appeared to the family during dinner," he read out loud, "and gave a dire warning to old Lord Backwater that sounded like she's coming for you." He tossed the paper on the desk and eyed his younger sister with amusement. "It's just the Backwaters trying to drum up more publicity for their crumbling estate."

"Then why did the old man suffer a heart attack an hour later?" Star asked while tidying up the mess her brother had made of their father's office. "Do you have to leave rubbish on the floor? I'm not your cleaner." Sam examined the article again.

"I missed the waste basket." He remarked distractedly. "You really believe something supernatural is going on up there?" Star understood her brother's scepticism, everyone in the village knew the Backwater's was facing bankruptcy after bad money investments. They had opened their home: Angel Crest Manor to the public to try and rake in some cash but the poor state of the house, and the fact that tourists rarely passed this way meant they were getting further in debt.

The Angel Crest ghost had come into being a few months ago and the Wests knew it was a shameful ploy to draw in the masses, everybody loved an old haunted house, but after the Lord's mysterious death Star wasn't too sure the Backwater's were making it up.

"They lost power and heat," she replied, "and every single clock in the house stopped at 8p.m. I think it's worth checking out, even if it's not our thing, it will get you out of here for a few hours." He eyed her with suspicion.

"Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"No, you're practically bouncing off the walls, it will do you good."

"You're not coming?" Sam asked with surprise in his voice. Star straightened and gave up trying to straighten the office.

"I have to do the books and besides the Backwater's are only hiring one person."

"What do you mean *hiring*?" Sam's voice went up a decibel and Star failed to hide her grin.

“Sam they aren’t just going to let you in, they’re advertising for a handyman and that is the one thing you’re good at. You can go wherever you like and no one will bat an eyelid, it’s the perfect way to investigate without drawing attention to yourself.” He sighed and gave her the evil eye.

“You seem to have all this planned out.”

“I’m a fast thinker. Now get going we don’t want the position filled. I’ll be here all day if you need me.” Throwing on his jacket and grabbing his keys Sam grudgingly left the office and stepped out into a bright cold day.

As he drove the dark blue Chevy through the town he couldn’t help but ponder what Star was up to. If this was their thing then they obviously needed to solve it, but something told him that there was more to this than his sister was saying.

They had lived in Benson Rapids all their lives. Their parents moved here when Father retired from the New York Police Department. He became a private investigator and their Mother had worked as his secretary. Sadly everything changed for the worse after the crash. Sam was the black sheep of the family, he had enlisted in the army much to his Father’s disappointment, after his death Sam swore to make him proud if it was the last thing he did.

Big rusted gates rose up in front of him and Sam forced himself to concentrate on the here and now. They were open thanks to the comings and goings of police and emergency services, but when Sam pulled up the drive the place was eerily quiet.

Angel Crest Manor was a formidable looking Victorian style house. At the height of its grandeur it would have rivalled the prettiest structure but in its crumbling state it resembled more of a derelict house. The grassy lawns that surrounded the gravel drive were trimmed but balding in patches and most of the Manor’s fifteen acres had been sold off.

The sun had disappeared behind grey heavy rain clouds that seemed to be in permanent attendance at Angel Crest, Sam walked up the stone steps and rang the doorbell. “Can I help you with something?” He turned to see a young girl with pale skin looking up at him from the bottom step.

“Yeah, I’m here about the handyman job.” She blew her nose into a tissue and managed a smile, the old Lord’s death must have hit her hard, Sam knew what it felt like to have someone you loved taken from you.

“This way.” He followed her inside and they walked through a wooden foyer. Hunting trophies littered the shelves and cabinets along with stuffed and mounted heads of deer, bear and the odd wolf. “I’m Lucy Backwater, you’ll have to forgive us but you’ve called on a particularly sad day.” She told him as they travelled through the Manor that was as gloomy as its exterior. “My Grandfather passed away last night.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Thank you.” Lucy’s heavy skirt swayed as she walked and Sam wondered how she managed not to trip, the thing brushed the floor. “Truth is I think he was murdered.” She added quietly and Sam

looked at her sharply.

“By whom?” Lucy pulled him over to the wall and took a deep breath.

“I don’t know why I’m telling you this.” She confided. “No one else here wants to hear it, and they say it’s easier to talk to strangers...” Sam said nothing, watching the struggle on her face as she debated whether to carry on or not. “You’re going to think I’m crazy,” she let out a nervous laugh.

“Maybe.” Sam answered. Lucy looked at him, studying him, after a brief pause she continued.

“Do you believe in the afterlife Mr...?”

“Smith. Sam Smith.” He cringed inwardly at his lame attempt to come up with something original.

He couldn’t tell her his real name because his father had done some work for the Backwater’s, and Sam didn’t want to engage in a trip down memory lane. Too messy. In and out, that was the way Sam liked to work. “And yes I believe there’s life after death.” Lucy smiled and guided him to a love seat that ran parallel to the old marble staircase.

“Something weird has been happening lately.” She started. “We’ve all heard the noises at night. Footsteps walking the halls when everybody’s in bed. I was in the kitchen just the other week and a jug fell to the floor and smashed. There was no one near it Mr Smith. I know the locales think we’re making it up to attract tourists but we’re not. Last night a man appeared in the dining room and warned my Grandfather that he was in danger...An hour later he was dead!”

“Did you recognise the man?” Lucy shook her head.

“I’ve never seen him in my life! He just poof! Disappeared. It was like he was a...”

“Ghost?” Sam offered and she nodded her head, unable to say the words out loud.

“The police think it was a trick, someone playing a practical joke on us that proved too much for my Grandfather...”

“But you don’t?” She shook her head.

“I think something really bad is happening here Mr Smith...something not of this world.”

Chapter Two

After meeting Lord and Lady of the Manor Sam had been hired and shown to the shabby shed beside the greenhouse. His wife had been appalled that her husband could think about business after he had just lost his father, but as Lord Backwater curtly told her; the show must go on.

His first task was to examine the crime scene, under the guise of testing the lights in the dining room, Sam looked around for anything that would suggest the family had indeed been visited by a ghost. It was un-naturally cold but Lucy who was following him around like a lost puppy dog told him that the boiler was on its last legs, so that could have explained it, but it didn't explain the old dusty Grandfather clock that had stopped precisely at 8.p.m.

"I don't know what's wrong with it." Lucy said after he had casually inquired about it. "It normally runs...well like clockwork. We've tried winding it but the pointers are stuck."

"And that was the same time this mysterious figure appeared?" Sam asked moving to the last light.

"Yes, what are you driving at?" She fixed him with a hard look and he quickly shrugged his shoulders.

"Just a weird coincidence is all."

"It is." Lucy agreed, "all the clocks in the house have done the same." Sam held his tongue. He wasn't about to tell her that time froze whenever something supernatural interfered with it. Even the clocks weren't enough to prove Star's theory, someone could have fiddled with them, it would prove difficult to tamper with them all, but not impossible. The Backwater's were fighting for survival and Sam wouldn't put anything past them.

During the course of the morning he searched every bit of the house but found nothing concrete, in fact he had come across nothing of interest at all, but he had picked up an admirer. Lucy insisted on showing him around and annoying him with her constant gibbering.

After managing to sneak away for a minute Sam called his sister. It took several rings before she answered the office phone. "Where've you been?" He demanded testily.

"I had to pop out for some more milk." She answered. "I was just coming in when you rang, have you found something?" Sam frowned; he knew when his sister was lying. She had been acting weird all day, knowing this was the wrong time to call her out he sighed.

"Not a thing."

"What about the clocks?"

“Could have been tampered with.” He glanced at the lawn that stretched out in front of him, surrounding a big lake with an old twisted Willow tree draping over it, its thin finger-like-branches brushed the top of the water, sending ripples across it when the faint breeze jilted them. Something caught his eye and he did a double take. A slender figure with long raven hair that reached down to its backside stood in front of the lake, dressed in a white gown that ended just above its feet. Intrigued Sam started to walk towards it. “Hold on a minute...” He told Star who was rambling on about something or other.

Whoever it was had its back to him, so he didn’t see a face, it just stayed there as solid and unmoving as a rock. As Sam got in touching distance its head jerked around at an ungodly angle, doing a 360 turn like an owl. He had seconds to see its face before it stretched out its arms and flung itself backwards into the dark murky waters of the lake...

Chapter Three

By the look of her brother's face when he entered the café Star knew he had seen something to have changed his mind. He was as white as milk and he threw himself down into the wooden chair. "What will it be Sam?" Nancy the waitress asked popping her trade mark bubble gum.

"Coffee...strong!"

"Sure thing daddy-o." Star watched Nancy strut away.

"Whatever did you see in her?" She pondered out loud.

"What?" Sam barked flicking his eyes back and forth between the two girls as he stripped off his jacket.

"Nancy!" Star elaborated. "She's been round town more times than the train." Sam stared at her with irritation before saying.

"She's a good lay, that's all. It wasn't love at first sight." Star pulled a disgusted face; Nancy came back with Sam's black coffee and made sure he got an eyeful before slinking back off to whatever hole she had crept out of.

"So...what happened?"

"It was the damnedest thing Star. We've hunted a lot of ghosts in the past but this...it's like nothing I've ever encountered before. She just appeared right in front of me, no warning, no coldness...nothing!"

"And she just fell into the lake?" Sam nodded sipping his hot coffee.

"I waited an hour she never resurfaced or appeared, and no one in the house knows of a woman drowning in the lake." Star sat back and looked out the window thoughtfully. The bright day had given way to dark rain clouds and shoppers dashed past with umbrellas and hoods wrapped around their heads.

"I have to admit." She finally said, "I hadn't heard anything about anyone dying up there till this morning, drowned or otherwise." Sam shook his head, his mind still reeling from the phantom.

"Maybe she didn't drown." He said finally. Star arched her eyebrows at him. "The way she did it...she didn't go head first like she had fallen in, or was pushed. She faced me and spread her arms...like she was doing it of her own free will..."

"You mean it looked like suicide?" Sam nodded.

"This is definitely our thing Star, but Lucy's right, something bad is going on up there...I can feel it."

"Lucy?" He realized he'd said too much.

"Lucy Backwater, the Lord's daughter she thinks her Grandfather was murdered, and I have to say I'm starting to think the same."

"Yeah but it was a man who appeared last night, not a woman."

"Then we have two ghosts up there to contend with. I better get back." Sam got to his feet and pulled on his jacket.

"I'll search the library; see if I can find out who this woman and man is." Star said and followed her brother out into the rain.

"Star." Sam turned to her with concern festering in his dark eyes. "Are you okay?" She looked at him like he'd grown two heads.

"I'm fine." She laughed nervously. "We'll meet up before dark. Bye." With one wave she marched off down the soaked High street. Sam wasn't a touchy feely kind of guy but he knew in his gut something was really wrong...

Chapter Four

Armed with Sam's description of the woman that he had given her earlier, Star spent the afternoon scouring the news archive in the two storey library of Benson Rapids. Three hours and two cups of coffee later she still had zip.

There was no mention of a suicide happening at Angel Crest, no mention of death what so ever which Star found weird in itself. Even a Backwater dying by natural means would have made it into the local papers, they were the closest thing to royalty that the village had.

"Found anything useful?" The soft feminine voice of the librarian Tess Brooks gave Star a good excuse for a break.

"Nope, I swear I'll still be here when I'm sixty." Tess chuckled and leaned against the cheap desk that the computer monitor rested on.

"Star...Sam hasn't called me back yet." Star tensed up not sure how to answer. Tess was way better than Nancy and she had hoped that when her brother had asked Tess out on a date, the pair would get together. All it led to was a movie and a million voicemails from a confused Tess on the office answering machine.

"He's been pretty busy lately." She answered carefully. Tess stared at her and Star squirmed uncomfortably.

"So he's not giving me the brush off?" Star forced a smile.

"Of course not, you know how he is..." she trailed off hoping Tess wouldn't press. Sam was dark and dangerous and Star knew that meant irresistible to most of the female population, but after

what they been through Sam had closed himself off, afraid of hurting like that again and now only indulged his...bodily needs shall we say. Plus he felt bound to protect her, afraid that Star would leave him too. It was no way to live but she had faith that with time he would get over it. "Thanks Star, I really like him you know." Tess's words brought Star out of her thoughts.

"Just give it time Tess. He'll call." The smile on her face widened.

"Well I'm going to close up now; you know the drill just lock up after you leave." Star nodded and accepted the key Tess pressed into her palm before vanishing back down the aisles. This wasn't the first time Star had stayed up all night researching a case.

Star went back to searching the Backwater's history as the sky darkened. Outside the streetlamps slowly warmed up, illuminating the dimness of the library. Sucked into the paper clippings on the monitor she didn't realize how late it was, and didn't hear her cell ringing because she had switched it onto silent upon entering the stacks.

"Star..." A low whisper that called to her stopped her dead. At first it was so faint she dismissed it, but then it came again...louder. Swivelling in her chair Star's almond eyes swept the library.

"Tess...?" Of course it wasn't Tess, she had left ...Star looked at her watch that had stopped at 5.p.m. She swallowed hard and urged her heart to stop hammering against her ribs. She had come face to face with things that went bump in the night, but this wasn't your average ghost, this was more. She could feel it.

Star had tried not to be alone when it got dark because that's when he came: the man in black. The man Sam couldn't see.

Hurrying to her feet Star grabbed her rain coat and keys, in her hurry to leave she upset the chair, it thumped onto the floor and she stooped to pick it up. That was when she heard it.

Footsteps. They banged across the wooden floor loud enough to wake the dead.

Star took off in the opposite direction.

Running through the stacks to the entrance she ran as fast as her legs could carry her. The lamps that rested on the scattered work desks went out, plunging her into absolute darkness. Star knew the library well enough to fumble her way forward. Yanking out the cell from her coat pocket the display lit up telling her that she had missed eight calls from her brother.

Star was just about to call him when the lights returned, bringing with it the noise of books being hurtled from their shelves. Turning slowly her heart sank as every book in the row of stacks behind her emptied, hitting the floor with a booming thud.

Then blackness came...

*

"Where the hell have you been?" Sam yelled as his sister walked into the office. "I've been ringing you for an hour!"

"Sorry." She mumbled shuffling over to the torn leather couch that lay against the far wall,

throwing herself down onto it.

"You okay?" Star glanced at him with dazed eyes.

"Huh?" A panicked dread formed in the pit of his stomach and he went over, his eyes running over her looking for any signs of injury.

"What happened?" Star blinked rapidly and with each flutter the confusion in her eyes abated.

"Nothing...I just spooked myself." Sam threw her a sceptical look. "I was in the library with my cell on silent searching for something on these bloody ghosts!" She shot. "I didn't realize how late it was and..."

"And what?" Sam prodded when she trailed off. She raked her fingers through her long dark hair and Sam saw something on her wrist, he grabbed her arm and pushed her sleeve up more. A bluish-black bruise circled her wrist, like someone had dragged or bound her. "What's this?" He asked in a tense barely contained tone. She looked down at it silently.

"Who did this to you Star?" He shouted getting to his feet.

"Sam..."

"Don't dare Sam me!" He told her. "I'll kill them!"

"Sam..." He was pacing the floor like a caged wolf.

"Was it that...Damon guy? The one that came onto you a few weeks ago in Benny's?"

"No...Sam please!"

"Then who?" Star sighed tiredly.

"I honestly don't know." She said quietly. "I woke up on the library floor with it." The rage on Sam's face turned to concern.

"What were you doing on the floor?" He asked totally confused by her explanation.

"I...don't remember."

"Okay, grab your coat. I'm taking you to Doc Parsons." Star stayed where she was.

"There's nothing wrong with me Sam, don't be silly."

"Silly? Star you woke up on the library floor with a nasty looking bondage bruise on you wrist! And you don't remember anything about it! That's not normal." He exclaimed grabbing the keys to his Chevy.

"And what about our life is normal Sam?" He exhaled deeply.

"Star anything could have happened to you, you were as dazed as hell when you walked in here. You could have been ruthied." She gaped at him.

"Ruthied? You think I've been raped is that it?" She said absolutely gob smacked.

"Star." He breathed. "We don't know. This could have nothing at all to do with the supernatural, I'll feel better once we get you checked over."

"Sam look at me! Did my would be raper dress me afterward? You're being ridiculous!" He gave her the evil eye and she didn't have the strength or inclination to stand here arguing with him.

"Whatever! I'm going to bed."

“What’s that?” She rolled her eyes and slinked away to the door that led to the house.

“I said I’m tired, I’m going to bed.”

“No I mean that in your coat pocket!” Star looked down and sure enough there was a sheet of paper peeking over the helm of her pocket. Frowning she took it out and unfolded it. Her mouth dropped open as she read it over. “What is it?” Sam asked, unable to find the words Star handed it to him.

“Hattie Jamieson,” he read, “was reported missing today by her mother Gladys.”

“Look at the picture.” Star instructed and watched his eyes widen.

“It’s her!” He exclaimed excitedly. “The girl I saw at the Backwater’s lake! It’s her! You found it!”

He beamed walking over to the desk. Star shuffled to the house, knowing damn well that she hadn’t found a thing...

Chapter Five

The newspaper article on Hattie Jamieson’s sudden disappearance was their one solid lead, and Sam threw himself into the task at hand instead of worrying about the state of his sister. He knew she was lying about not remembering anything but he was afraid of finding the truth.

What if there was something wrong with her that Sam couldn’t fight?

He had lost his parents he wouldn’t survive losing Star too. Early the next morning he checked on his sister then drove to Angel Crest. Even though it was barely past eight Lucy was sitting on the front steps, waiting for him. “Morning.” She beamed. He couldn’t hide his slight smile at her eagerness. Under different circumstances he might have been tempted...but he was here to solve a murder not his out of control sex drive.

“Lucy, do you know this girl?” He asked taking the print out from his jean pocket. She examined it and laughed.

“Sam, it says here she went missing in 1938! A bit before my time.” She handed it back to him.

"I know that, I just thought you might have come across her in your old family's photos, or something." A puzzled frown creased her forehead.

"Are you saying we're related?" Sam looked at her.

"Lucy, she worked here as a scullery maid. She disappeared right here on these grounds." Her mouth dropped open. It was all in the article, how she never returned home after work, had last been seen coming out of the master bedroom, and that was the last time anyone saw her. Before Lucy could respond a voice interrupted them.

"So this is your handyman." Sam turned and nearly dropped the sheet of paper in his hands. Laura, Lucy's older sister was leaning against the porch railing with a sneer on her face, a sneer that faded when she saw Sam.

"Sam this is Laura, my sister." Lucy introduced grudgingly, but it wasn't required. They had already met in a nightclub in New York. She had been hard to forget. He realized Lucy was looking at him and turned away.

"Hey." He said casually to Laura as he slipped past to the house. He was in the foyer when the door banged shut behind him.

"What are you doing here?" Laura hissed, spinning him around roughly. "Are you blackmailing me?"

"What!"

"Just because my father's rich doesn't mean..."

"I'm not here for you." He interrupted. "I'm working, remember?" She gave him a suspicious glare.

"Really?"

"Really. I didn't even know you lived here. You didn't exactly leave your name and number behind." She smirked and Sam was instantly transfixed by her beauty. Long waves of shimmering blonde cascaded over her shoulders, and her perfect bronze skin looked so good he wanted to touch it.

"You didn't seem the kind of guy that would use it." She said, running her hands up his chest.

Lucy's scream made Sam forget all about his arousal and he dashed back outside.

He skidded to a stop on the porch and Laura slammed into him. Lucy was cowering beside Sam's parked Chevy, an old man dressed in a carbon dated suit pointed a trembling finger at her.

"She's coming for..."

"Sam!" Star's voice cut the old man off and Sam saw his sister freeze when the ghost turned his attention to her instead. He used the distraction to extract Lucy, who was shaking so bad she couldn't walk. He left her in the arms of her sister and started toward Star.

"You." The ghost whispered staring straight at Star. The sound of an engine reached their ears and the ghost vanished. Minutes later the Backwater's Bentley pulled into the drive.

"Lucy?" Mrs Backwater ignored everyone else and ran to her daughter who was scared to death.

"What's going on here?" Lord Backwater demanded, slamming the car door. Sam looked at Star

and knew she was thinking the same thing.

“Lord Backwater,” she started. “My name’s Star West and this is my brother Sam. You knew our father John; he did some work for you a while back.” The Lord stared at her with cold eyes until he suddenly slapped his thigh.

“The detective?” Star nodded.

“How is he?”

“Dead.” Sam butt in, the smile vanished from Lord Backwater’s face.

“Look your family is in grave danger.” Star told him. “You must leave this house immediately.”

“Leave?” Backwater repeated perplexed. “Why the devil should we do that? This is our home girl!”

“Sir,” Sam tried. “What happened to your father wasn’t an accident. Lucy’s right, he was murdered, and his death is only the beginning. You have to leave now!” The Lord’s face turned bright red with rage.

“How dare you!” He thundered. “My father was an old sick man. I don’t know what Lucy has been telling you...”

“Listen to him father.” Lucy pleaded fending off her mother. Sam looked on in shock as Lord Backwater tumbled to the ground in a heap.

“We had to hurry this along.” Star said when they all stared at the thick heavy log in her hands. Sam nodded his praise and immediately set about lifting Lord Backwater into the car with the help of Lucy.

“I’m calling the police!” Mrs Backwater exclaimed getting to her feet, but Laura held her back.

“They’re right mother, we have to leave now!” Something in her daughter’s stricken face changed her mind and she grudgingly let Laura lead her to the Bentley.

“Are you okay to drive?” Sam asked Lucy, peering through the passenger side window. There was a grim determination to her face when she nodded. “Drive to town and stay at my office,” Sam handed her the office door key from his key ring. “Wait there till I come for you.” Lucy took the key and gunned the motor, leaving air borne gravel in her wake as the car sped off.

“You ready for this?” He asked his sister. They both stared up at Angel Crest Manor, a bolt of lightning lit up the darkening sky. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“I did some digging in town.” Star replied as they started up the steps. “Mrs Marsden, the old midwife claims Hattie was with child when she disappeared seventy five years ago. She went to Marsden for help because the child’s father was Lord George Backwater...”

Chapter Six

As soon as they crossed the threshold into the foyer, the front door closed behind them. Sam took a deep breath and led the way forward. "So what are we thinking here? He dumped her and she dumped herself in to the lake?"

"You said it looked like a suicide, and the ghost did warn of a she..."

"You've got it all wrong." The ghost voice boomed off the walls. Star turned and marched into the cream painted parlour before Sam could stop her.

"You're Lord George, aren't you?" She said to the ghost who had reappeared and stood with his back to them. He gazed into the flames of the fire that burned in the old log fireplace.

"Yes, and Hattie didn't kill herself, nor did I kill her." Sam stayed beside the door, his stance ready for anything while Star edged closer.

"Tell us what happened, why did Hattie kill old Lord Backwater?" George turned and stared at her with dark glistening eyes.

"Hattie didn't do it. It was my wife, Mildred."

"You mean there are three ghosts in this house?" Sam gasped. George glanced at him briefly then settled into a brown armchair.

"Not exactly. The minute I married Mildred I knew it was a mistake. My parents thought it would be a smart match, my feelings didn't enter into it." He snorted bitterly. "She was a cold woman with a dead heart. The only thing Mildred cared about was money. Then I met Hattie Jamison, she was so warm and kind, not to mention beautiful. We fell in love..."

"You could have just divorced your wife." Sam piped. George shook his head.

"If I did that Mildred would receive half of my estate! I refused to give the snake what she wanted. When Hattie told me she was with child I was overjoyed. I made plans for her to give birth away from Angel Crest...but Mildred found out, she was a very intuitive woman. While I was away on business she poisoned my Hattie, in the disguise of a good meal. I returned early and saw Mildred along with her lover, throwing Hattie's body into the lake." The room fell quiet and it was a while before anyone spoke.

"I couldn't live without her so I shot myself, and Mildred...well she got everything..."

"But then why is she still here? Why kill the Backwater's?" Star asked more to herself than anyone else. "She got what she wanted...she should be at peace..."

"He raised her spirit." George whispered, the room was bathed in darkness as the sun disappeared, and the fire crackled with the draft coming in from the old windows. George's words struck a chord in Star, and she instinctively knew who he was talking about.

"What?" Sam asked. "Who raised her?" George turned to Star and their eyes met.

"The devil in black." He answered. "You know of whom I speak?" Star's throat had dried up making it hard to speak so she simply nodded.

"Star? What's he on about?" Sam crossed the room and stood in front of her, demanding the truth with his hard glare.

"He's back Sam." She told him quietly, getting to her feet. She knew he got her meaning by the look on his face. The man in black had appeared straight after the accident. He followed Star everywhere but never spoke a word or tried to contact her in anyway. He was just there. After finding out that the brush with death had changed her and Sam, Star began to understand that the figure in black was a ghost, but was unnerved by her brother's inability to see him.

She had tried everything to converse with this strange entity but all to no ends. Eventually he

simply disappeared altogether, which was fine with her. A little over a year ago when they were on case in Pennsylvania, he had mysteriously reappeared. Only now he was frightening. Since his return Star hadn't been sleeping too well, her rest plagued with nightmares and now he spoke to her, told her dreadful things. Star had been secretly searching for a way to get him out of her life...but had had no such luck.

"Is that what happened in the library?" Sam asked in a tight voice, his face pale in the moonlight. Star pushed her hair behind her ear and Lord George gasped. He was in front of her in a heartbeat grabbing her arm and pulling up her sleeve. The bruise around her wrist looked worse than ever, the bruises had faded overnight leaving a red ring that seemed to glow on her pale skin.

"The devil's mark..." George breathed.

"What?" Sam barked.

"He's marked you child." George muttered staring at her with wide eyes. "He has laid claim to you. This mark brands you as his." Star's heart hammered, battering her rib cage and Sam stared down at the mark around her wrist. Suddenly there was a loud primal scream that literally shook the house.

"It's her!" George shouted. "Oh dear God protect us!"

"Clam down." Sam instructed. "The Backwater's are safe." George looked at him with pity. "Ghosts can't hitch rides. Mildred's confined to the place where she died."

"Yes ghosts are restricted to their death sites, but Mildred is not a ghost. She's a spirit called fourth by the black devil. She has no such restraints!" Sam and Star looked at each other as the scream died down and was replaced by the banging of the front door as it swung open.

"Shit! Sam yelled as they both bolted for the Chevy. As he spun the car round and gunned for town he prayed that they could reach the office before Mildred, but he didn't like his odds ...

Chapter Seven

The Chevy pulled to a screeching halt as they pulled up in front of the office. Something heavy

hit the hood of the car and red sprayed the window screen. The current Lord Backwater's face cracked the glass as it collided with the screen, his head caving in on impact.

Sam and Star stared at his broken body; tears pricked her eyes as she tried to keep in the wails of panic. Sam was out the car and dashing into the office, getting herself under control Star stepped out into the cold night air and gulped in some much needed oxygen. Forcing herself to check Backwater's pulse and finding none, Star followed her brother.

She found Sam on the floor cradling Lucy's broken body in his arms. They had gotten here too late. Their office had been redecorated with blood, guts, and organs and ripped flesh. Star's world spun and she bent over trying to blink away the sight that was burned onto her retinas.

Distant sirens broke the silence and she stumbled outside to wait for the police.

*

It was two days until they saw daylight again. The cops had questioned them relentlessly, but Sam and Star stuck to their stories. No they didn't kill the Backwater's and no they didn't who did, (they couldn't exactly tell them the truth: an evil spirit called fourth by a devil dressed in black did it.) The main thing that saved their bacon was that no murder weapon had yet been found.

Pulling the Chevy over Sam got out the car and sat on the hood. He was exhausted, dirty and hungry and Lucy's death weighed on him heavily, as did his sister's situation. "What are you doing?" Star asked sitting next to him. "Benson Rapids is in the other direction."

"We're not going home."

"The cops told us not to leave..." she reminded him meekly. Sam made a frustrated noise and losing his head proceeded to kick the Chevy repeatedly. Star said nothing. This was his coping mechanism, he would never admit it but she knew he had cared for Lucy. After tiring himself out Sam stopped.

"It's just a matter of time before they arrest us for the Backwater murders." He said tiredly. "They were found in our office that is covered with our fingerprints. We have to leave."

"You mean go on the run?"

"We can't help people in jail Star!"

"But we didn't do anything wrong!" Tears slid down her face and Sam's tone softened.

"Hey, come on now don't cry Star," he soothed.

"I can't help it!" She shouted and collapsed into him.

"Look I'm not saying that we can't ever come back. Just until we find a way to clear our names."

"How are we going to do that?"

"I don't know." He admitted. "But let's start with getting this black devil bastard..." Star looked up at him.

"What if we can't."

"Then we'll go down swinging. Star you're the only thing I have left in this world, I won't lose

you. Whatever this thing is it can't have you. We'll find a way to right all this I promise you, but for now we have to run..." Star straightened and swiped at her eyes. She nodded and they got back in the car. She wasn't sure how all this would end but it didn't matter, just as long as they faced it together...

Book Three.

The Deathly Depths

Prologue

He staggered down the dark deserted alley. The odour of vomit mixed with urine invaded his nostrils, and the man wrinkled up his nose in disgust. Filthy animals, treating his town like a urinal.

Further into the black he stumbled, eager to get home and give his right hand a workout. His foot connected with something soft and he let out a groan. "Please don't say its dog shit again", he prayed. The amount of times he had had to scrub his shoes clean after a Saturday night of walking down this alley, he should be a professional shoe polisher.

He took out his lighter and lifted his right shoe. In his intoxicated state the movement made him lose his balance and he landed face first in a dis-guarded, ripped black bin liner, full of rotting rubbish that spilled onto the Deteriorating tarmac thanks to starved Seagulls.

"Argh!" he yelled, his voice stifled by the bin liner. For a moment it felt like he couldn't breathe, that he was slowly being smothered. Death by garbage: now that was a funny headline.

He pressed his flat palms against the ground and managed with great difficulty to heave himself vertical again. The world swayed and he precariously stumbled against the wet brick wall.

"Let's get the fuck out of here." He muttered and set off down the alley. The laughter that seemed to echo around him sounded like a child's. He stopped and looked back. There was nothing but an abyss of blackness; ahead he could hear the faint exhaust of a car, "must have drunk more than I thought." The man said to himself.

He set off as fast as his body would allow, "bloody hearing things now." He grumbled, trotting unsteadily down the alley. The laughter came again but this time seemed closer. The man spun and felt anger erupt inside him. "I know who you are! You're that little piss faggot from down the block." He shouted, his voice full of false bravado. "Fuck off or I'll kick your head in!" The laughter was right beside him; it tickled the thin hairs that poked out his ears, making an unpleasant shiver travel down his spine.

The man flinched and staggered backwards. "I'm warning you, you little cunt." His voice shook

with fear, and he knew he had lost all hope of scaring his tormentor off. Turning towards the bright streetlamps of Main Street the man made a break for it.

He made it out the alley and leaned against the bakery shop wall, his feet safe on familiar ground. He took deep breaths and let out a shaky laugh. "Fucking little cockroach, thinking he could scare me like that." He lit a cigarette that fell smouldering onto the cold paving, as strong hands grabbed him roughly and yanked the man back into the shadows of the alley.

His gurgled screams died quickly as the sounds of ripping flesh filled the air. Blood oozed down the paving and dripped into the gutter, just a few feet away a car lurched past.

Main Street was silent once more.

Chapter One

"I'm just saying that it's not my cup of tea." Star West exclaimed getting out the battered Ford.

"How can you not like the X-Files?" Her brother asked with astonishment as he grabbed their bags from the back seat. "It's a cult classic." Star rolled her eyes and zipped up her coat.

"I didn't say I didn't like it." She pointed out, wrestling with the wind that had swirled her dark hair in to her face making it impossible to see. "I watch it." Sam gave her a disapproving grin.

"Only because of Mulder." Star felt her face heat up. "I've seen you drool over him."

"Whatever." She muttered, walking towards the motel office.

"Star hold up." Sam's shout made her turn and she saw his dark eyes lock onto the alley across the street. There was yellow crime scene tape across the mouth of it, sealing it off from the crowds of onlookers. Two uniformed policemen were ushering them back whilst trying to keep the camera crews at bay. "Book us in." Sam told her dropping the bags onto the sidewalk. "I'm going to take a peek."

"Sam!" Star shouted angrily. "You've just drove eleven hours straight. You need some sleep." He waved her off.

"I'll be fine." She watched him cross the street and let out a frustrated growl. Since the mass murder of the Backwater family back in Benson Rapids, Sam hadn't slept. She knew he was having a hard time with it. He had been friendly with two members of the family, but he couldn't keep this up. They had laid more ghosts to rest in the past few months than in the past two years. He was wearing himself out and her along with it.

Star struggled over to the Manager's office and muscled open the door. It was painted bright red with dark mahogany imitation furniture. A balding man in his fifties stood at the counter. "Hi can I have a room with two single beds please." Star said putting the heavy bags that held most of their personal belongings down.

"How many nights?" Star thought about it. They were supposed to just be passing through, lying low, but she knew what Sam was like when he was on to something.

"A couple." She eventually answered. "What happened?" The man took her I.D. that she slid across the surface towards his waiting hand. She had been in enough motels to know the drill.

"A man was killed last night." He studied the I.D. Card. "Rumour has it, he was mauled to death by some kind of animal. All chewed up." Star loved small towns, the gossips did half their job for them.

"You have many animal attacks round here?" She asked casually as he handed back the key to the room and her I.D.

"First one. We don't even have bears!" The man continued to gaze out the big window at the alley as Star heaved the luggage along the walkway and unlocked room 27. She showered, ordered out and was watching some daytime T.V. nonsense on cable when Sam reappeared.

His mass of dark hair had grown longer disguising his model like cheekbones. Star knew he was running on empty just by the look on his face. "Well?" She prompted when he flopped into a chair.

"Jay Leno, thirty three years of age was walking home from Peggy Sue's...a bar." He elaborated in his rough ragged tone, "when he was attacked and ripped apart by what the authorities are calling a wild animal."

"But you don't think so?" Star asked with a mouthful of pizza. Sam shook his head.

"There's no history of animal attacks in this town. And there's no zoo in the vicinity. It was no fucking animal."

"Why would they say it was?" Star pushed the pizza box towards him and he gratefully accepted.

"Scared? Who the hell knows? He lived alone and worked at a designing company on Main

Street, I'm gonna go call on the company owner. Apparently he and Jay were best buddies."

"No you're not." Star got to her feet and physically restrained him before shoving on her boots.

"Star..."

"Don't Star me. You're exhausted and hungry. I'll go talk to the boss while you eat and grab some sleep. It's not up for discussion." She told him when he tried to cut her off. "I won't be long."

"But how are you even going to get there? You don't drive." He said smugly, thinking he had her.

"I'll walk." Star told him opening the door. "It's why God gave us legs." She teased before the pizza box was hurled at her.

Chapter Two

It didn't take Star West long to obtain the same information her brother had from the policeman guarding the crime scene. She even got Jay's boss's name and address.

The house wasn't far and the wind had abated, so Star decided to walk the three blocks to his house. Banks drift was a pretty little seaside town, away from the hustle and bustle of the big city life. Apple trees were dropping their bounty onto the short cut lawns of houses as she walked past. The Oaks swayed in the gentle breeze making rustic music that lulled Star into calmness.

She came to a huge two storey house with a white picket fence: the typical American dream style home. Checking the mailbox Star mounted the porch and rang the bell. A tall muscular man with greying hair answered seconds later. "Gareth Lock?"

"It's pronounced L-O-K-I. Can I help you?" His big green eyes were rimmed with red and the skin beneath them was puffy.

"I'm sorry to bother you at a time like this but I knew Jay, and I just wanted to say how sorry I am..."

"You're her, aren't you?" Mr Lock said with a knowing grin. Star needed to know more about the victim so she played along, hoping she wouldn't get found out. "Veronica isn't it?"

"You found me out." Star held her hands up and Gareth smiled ushering her into the house.

“My wife took our son to her mother’s till...” he trailed off and looked at the floor. “It’s not nice for a child to be around this, please sit down. Can I offer you a coffee?” Star took a chair at the dining table.

“No. Thank you.” Gareth sat across from her. The kitchen was incredibly modern and expensive looking.

“He couldn’t stop talking about you, you know.” Lock eventually said. “I had never seen him so...loved up. Although you’re certainly more beautiful than he described, younger too.” Star let out a chuckle.

“Very nice of you to say so.” Then her expression was all business. “I was wondering if you had noticed a change in him lately.” Gareth’s face darkened and he suddenly got very defensive.

“How do you mean?” His tone was clipped as Lock leaned back in his seat, as if to put some distance between them.

“Well, he just seemed slightly...off when I saw him last.” Star fished. Gareth studied her then swallowed hard. He had a rubbish poker face.

“I can’t say I noticed anything. He was the same old Jay to me, now if you’ll excuse me...” He got to his feet and Star did the same, thanking him for his time. As she left a car pulled up and a pretty woman got out. She ushered a child that resembled Lock so much it had to be his son, up the path, as an old hunched over woman gave Star the once over.

“I thought I told you not to come back till this evening.” Star heard Lock hiss.

“Mother said we should all be together...” His wife stammered. The child’s grey eyes locked with Star’s as they passed and for a second it seemed as if they were pleading with her.

The gate slammed shut behind her and Star watched them all trail into the house.

Gareth Lock was definitely hiding something.

Chapter Three

“Your right. The boss is...” Star stopped in mid-sentence. Sam pulled up his jeans as the blonde that was on her knees in front of him hastily got to her feet, and tried to fasten her blouse up.

Star turned away and waited for the woman to leave before rounding on her brother. “I don’t believe that’s sleeping.” She told him icily. “Who the hell was that? She isn’t a hooker, right?” It wouldn’t be the first time Sam had bought a warm body.

“That was Miss Patti Lavelle, the town’s coroner. “ He told her simply flopping back down on the bed, like he hadn’t a care in the world.

“So what you were fucking information out of her? Because where I was standing...”

“It’s none of your damn business. Your my sister not my mother.” He snapped and Star bristled.

“Can’t you see how badly you’re spiralling?” She asked fighting back tears. Apart from him Star didn’t have anybody else. Their parents had died in a car crash that had nearly claimed their lives too. Instead they had survived but had been changed somehow. They could see and communicate

with ghosts: they were freaks.

“Why? Because I’m face fucking a woman? That what guys are supposed to do Star.” He mocked picking up the telly remote. She pulled out the plug. For two month Star had been biting her tongue, but this was the last straw. It was time to get it off their chests.

“No, because a family we tried to protect was ripped apart in our office. Because the police think we did it and because Sam West, we’re wanted fugitives!” They stared at each other with hate before Sam finally conceded.

“I just...sometimes it’s all a bit too much.” He sighed. “Mum and dad, us with this bloody...curse, and now there’s you. That Casper in black is still out there Star, he wants you and I don’t know how to protect you. So yes I’m drinking and screwing myself silly. Just...lay off. I’m doing the best I can.” Star wanted to argue but she felt drained and collapsed on the bed next to him.

“What did you find out about our victim?” He asked after a few tense seconds had passed.

“Not much. But his boss, Gareth Lock knows more than he’s telling.” Sam stewed over this then pulled out his laptop from the duffel bag on the floor. “What are you doing?”

“Jay Leno officially died of a heart attack, then was eaten by some kind of animal.”

“Is that what Miss Patti came over here to tell you?” Star teased. Sam tossed her a warning glance.

“The Mayor is covering up what really happened to Jay.”

“And that is?” Sam looked at her while he waited for the computer to boot up, and smiled.

“He was literally ripped apart by what Patti can only describe as...human.”

Chapter Four

“Human?” Star repeated sceptically. The laptop whirled to life and Sam lost himself in it. “A human doesn’t have the strength to do that Sam, not without some kind of tool, which would have left marks...”

“Exactly, there was none Star. It was a ghost, a hugely pissed off one.” Sam ran over the mouse pad with his finger. “And I think I’ve found who it is.” He put the computer in her lap. “Ryan Small, drowned in silver Lake thirty six ago, he was only fifteen.”

Star closed the laptop and set it down on the bed, getting to her feet she paced the room while Sam watched with excitement lighting up his dark eyes. “It’s a tragedy sure, but there’s nothing that links him to Jay Leno or Gareth Lock.”

“Ryan Small was in the same year as them back at High school. They were bound to know each other, or at least pass in the hallways from time to time. It’s worth investigating.” Star studied him and tried to be diplomatic.

“Sam. I think you’re seeing what you want to. This is just all...too thin. We don’t know that a ghost was involved.” A hurt expression clouded her brother’s face, which was exactly what Star had wanted to avoid.

“Jay was ripped apart, his organs were displayed all over that alley, and it wasn’t an animal. You said yourself that there’s something fishy about Lock. This is the only lead we’ve got.”

“Not necessary. Jay was seeing someone called Veronica before he died. We should track her down and talk to her.” Sam grabbed his jacket.

“Fine. You do that. I’m going to talk to Ryan’s parents.” The door slammed shut behind him before she could even argue.

Sam gripped the steering wheel hard. He knew he was acting like a prat but he needed this to be their kind of thing. Work was the only thing that let him forget how utterly useless he was.

Ryan Small’s mother lived outside of town on a rundown farm; he had gotten the address from Patti, who had also been the one to put him onto Ryan. The woman who answered the door looked wrinkled and spent. Her grey hair was falling out of an untidy bun as she glared at him through suspicious eyes.

“Mrs Small? My name’s Bill Warner, I work for the Boston Globe. I was wondering if we could have a chat about your son Ryan.”

“Ryan’s dead.” She snapped. Sam flashed her he’s best smile.

“I know. That’s why I’m here.” The distrust began to disappear from her face.

“You’re writing about him?” Sam nodded.

“Good. About time somebody did. Come in.” She walked away and Sam closed the door behind him. The house had seen better days, the paint was peeling, the floorboards were loose and the furniture was rotting.

Mrs Small guided him into a living room and sat down in a rocking chair next to a roaring log fire, Sam took a seat on the ripped couch. "It was no damned accident." She said angrily. "They said he'd tripped, bumped his head and fell into the lake and drowned, but we knew the truth." She picked up a photograph of a man standing in front of an old Dodge, his arm around the thin shoulders of a gangly boy.

"A truth my husband couldn't live with, a truth that sent him to an early grave." She whispered sadly holding the frame to her chest. "Ryan was murdered you see, everyone knows but they don't care. They never cared about my beautiful boy..." tears streaked down her cheeks.

"Who murdered Ryan Mrs Small?" Sam prodded gently.

"Those bullies. Nasty vile little creatures they were. Always picking on him, stealing his lunch money, roughing him up. The poor devil used to cry himself to sleep every night."

"Do you know who they were?" The woman set the photo frame back down onto the end table that was cluttered with tissues.

"Oh I'll never forget the bastards who killed my son, Mr Warner." Sam edged closer and waited with bated breath.

"Jonathan Leno and Gareth Lock."

Chapter Five

Star sat on the cold bench and stared at the happy faces around her. Veronica had turned out to be a bust, after finally wrangling her address from the clerk in the mail office, Star had found out Jay Leno's big secret. He was a fake.

Veronica Givens was a local prostitute who let Jay tell people she was his girl, for fifty dollars a week. Star had hit a dead end. Sitting here at the play park watching little kids run around grinning like clowns, she couldn't help but feel lost.

When graduating from High School she had wanted to be a nurse, that circled the drain after the crash, everything had, for the past two and half years she and Sam had devoted their lives to the dead, helping them move on. Now she was starting to have doubts.

This life had cost her friends, jobs and a shot at normality, not to mention the perils they faced on a daily basis. They had lost their home and were now wanted for mass murder, was it worth it anymore?

“Bastard!”

The furious voice penetrated her gloom and Star’s head snapped up. It had been a boy’s voice but hardened with hate. Glancing around, her heart went into overdrive. A gangly boy with a mass of ginger hair that dripped water all down his body, stared straight at her from across the park.

“He’ll pay for what he did.” It said glaring at her with awful dark pits. Star forced herself to breathe, the ghost looked down, at its feet was Lock’s son, he too was staring at her.

“Help me.” The boy mouthed to her silently.

Sam snorted with impatience as Gareth Lock went to answer the door; he had just been getting into his flow.

“What’s the meaning of this...?” Lock’s strained voice said from the hallway. A minute later Star marched into the room with another woman and a boy that couldn’t have been older than ten.

“Star?” Sam got to his feet throwing her a bewildered look.

“Time to do it your way,” She told him before rounding on Gareth Lock. “Your family’s in danger and unless you tell us everything you know about Jay’s death, we can’t help you.” Sam looked at Gareth who looked as confused as Sam felt.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, or who you think you are...”

“He’s hurting you’re son.” Star snapped she motioned to the boy who clung to his mother like a tea bag to a sink. “No more hiding.” She told him softly, and he pulled up his jumper sleeve.

Sam stared at the dark bruises that covered the little boy's arm. The woman hugged her son tighter, Gareth Lock's mouth dropped open.

"Why didn't you...?" He mumbled.

"You never want to hear." His wife retorted harshly.

"Who is he? And what does he have to do with Jay's murder?" Star asked, relentless in her pursuit for the truth.

Gareth Lock got a tormented look in his eye, and he raked his hands through his hair. "His name is Ryan Small." He finally choked.

"And he wants revenge."

Chapter Six

"Ryan was always the odd one out." Gareth Lock started. "His family was poor and he always wore hand me downs, we used to call him names, rough him up you know, things kids do."

"It was April Fools and Jay wanted to plan a practical joke on Ryan." Lock trailed off and rubbed his palms against the fabric of his tailored trousers nervously. "We got Patti to..."

"Patti Lavelle?" Star interrupted.

"Yes, she was my girlfriend at the time."

Star flashed Sam a raise of eyebrows. "Go on." Sam commanded trying to ignore his sister.

"Ryan had a big crush on her, everyone knew it. Jay got Patti to invite him out to Silver Lake. Told him we'd had a fight and she needed to talk. The rest of us hid behind some bushes near the lake and Jay took his camcorder, which he'd borrowed from his father." Gareth took a deep breath. "I swear I didn't know what she was going to do, I would have..." He trailed off and his cheeks flushed with guilt.

"What happened?" Star prodded as the sun began its descent.

"Patti...came on to him. They kissed then she...undid his trousers." Sam looked at Star whose eyes shut briefly. There was no worse humiliation for a teenage boy. "Ryan had problems...he couldn't..."

"Perform?" Star snapped coldly, and Lock seemed to deflate.

"Jay couldn't muffle his laughter...I still remember the look on Ryan's face when he saw us, it still haunts me to this day."

"Did you kill Ryan Small?" Sam asked quietly.

Lock visibly shook. "We didn't mean too, I mean it was just supposed to be a joke, but Ryan got so angry. He swung for Jay who ducked. Ryan stumbled and hit his head on the pier, he fell into the water, it all happened so fast..." Gareth stared out the window.

"I watched his body sink into the dark water... I couldn't move."

"Did you even try to get help?" Star asked him and he nodded.

“We ran to the sheriff who is now mayor. They searched for him for two days but found nothing. They put it down to an accident.”

“They did or you did?” Sam threw at him.

“Jay persuaded us to say that he simply tripped and fell, which wasn’t far from the truth.”

“You knew he killed Jay, didn’t you?” Star said and he nodded.

“Jay had been having these dreams lately, told me he was seeing Ryan everywhere he went...”

“Have you?” Sam asked.

“Yes. But I thought nothing of it, that night often haunts me but this is different, Ryan seems so real...”

Star abruptly walked out the room and Sam followed. “Why now?”

“What?”

“This happened thirty six years ago Sam, why has Ryan waited all this time to seek revenge on his tormentors?”

“It’s Sliver Lake’s turn to hold the local swimming competition.” Lock’s wife said walking into the hallway. “The mayor had it dredged for glass and such, didn’t want any bad press.”

“And in doing so...”

“Disturbed Ryan’s watery grave.” Star finished her brother’s sentence.

“Please, help my son. He’s innocent in all this.” Star grasped her hand.

“Ryan’s hurting your son to get to Gareth, killing your husband isn’t enough. Ryan wants him to suffer.”

“Question is, how do we stop him?”

Chapter Seven

“Are you sure about this?” Star asked her brother as they walked down the rickety pier. The moon shone above them making the ripples of water in Silver Lake appear to flow like liquid mercury: hence the name.

“There’s no resolving this one sis.” Sam replied distractedly, “Ryan isn’t going to stop until his killers are six feet under.”

Star looked at the lake then at her brother, worry creasing her brow. “Yes but...t this is insane. That’s his domain down there, you’ll be at his mercy...”

“Star,” her brother had the same grim expression as she did, but he forced it from his face. “Ryan’s bones are down there, if we can get them and give them a proper burial in the cemetery...”

“You got the idea from a TV show Sam!” She yelled at him with exasperation. Normally the only way to lay a ghost to rest was to confront and solve what kept it here, but Sam was right, what Gareth and his friends did to this poor boy wasn’t going to be resolved so easily.

Star remembered seeing Ryan Small at the playground, there was a bad vibe that radiated off him like warmth from a radiator. He was here for revenge plain and simple. She shrugged off her coat with a sigh.

“Star we’ve been through this...” Her brother sighed while slipping off his boots.

“We’ve got more of a chance finding him if we both go, it’s a big lake...”

“You can’t bloody swim!”

Star tossed her coat down angrily. “I can a little!” She shouted. Sam’s face softened and he picked up her coat.

“It’s going to take a lot more than a ghost of a fifteen year old teenager to kill me.” He mused putting the coat around her shoulders. “You worry too much, I’ll be fine, but Gareth and the rest need you Star. Ryan could strike again at any time, I need you to keep them safe, I’ll call when it’s done.”

“What if you never call?” She whined in a high pitched voice.

“You know I will, I always do.”

Star paced the Lock’ living floor, keeping a constant watch of the clock above the mantle. It had been half an hour since Sam had gone into the lake. Gareth had called his cohorts and now they were all assembled in the kitchen, huddled around the dining table with hot mugs of coffee, desperately trying to come to terms with fact that ghosts were real.

“Come on Sam, ring damn it!” Star whispered trying to control her nerves. She cursed herself for not being a better swimmer, if she had she could have helped instead of standing around waiting for...

“Sam!” The cell in her hand rang and she said his name into the microphone, with a sigh of relief, but it was a cold angry voice that greeted her.

“If you want to see him again, bring them to me. Silver Lake ten minutes, don’t keep me waiting...”

The line went dead.

Chapter Eight

“You have a plan, right?” Lock whispered to her when they came face to face with Ryan Small. He was standing at the edge of the pier with a sickening grin on his pale, almost white face.

“Where’s Sam?” Star asked, evading Gareth’s question.

“He’s learning what drowning feels like.” The ghost sneered.

“If you hurt him...” Star spat stepping closer.

“You’ll what?” Ryan asked cocking his head at her with an amused glint flashing in his dead eyes.

“You can’t touch me.”

Star forced herself to regain composure, cooler heads prevailed and that was what she had to be if she had any hope of getting her brother back alive. “You’re right I can’t...”

“Star!” Lock hissed grabbing her arm.

“But she can.”

Star stepped back to reveal her secret weapon: Ryan’s mother.

They stared at each other for a second as if the blood in their veins had frozen, and time had ceased to have meaning. “My boy...” Mrs Small sobbed stumbling forwards, her shawl fell from her shoulders as she dropped to her knees in front of a startled Ryan, and fisted the legs of his jeans. “What have they done to you...”

Star had clutched at straws, not everyone could see the dead. She had prayed that Ryan’s mother would be able to, sometimes a close loved one could sense the presence of their departed and even in rare cases see them. Mrs Small was one of those rare people. Star had gotten lucky.

“You bitch!” Ryan snarled at Star and she knew she had to move fast.

“Ryan what they did was wrong, but killing them won’t change anything.”

“What would you know!” He snapped.

“I see death everyday Ryan, trust me, nothing good ever comes from it. These people will be punished for what they did to you I swear. They told me what happened, I’ll go to the police...”

“An eye for an eye!” Ryan snarled. He was in front of her one minute then gone the next. Mrs Lock cries made Star turn in time to see Ryan grabbing hold of Gareth’s son, clutching the boy to him Ryan fell back into the lake.

“No!” Gareth sobbed running to the edge and jumping in after his only child.

“Gareth no!” Star warned but it was too late. Ryan’s thin white face appeared above the water, his dark eyes the only thing visible above the gloomy water. Gareth saw him and tried to swim back but it was like trying to paddle through cement.

Star leaned down and stretched out her hand, “swim!” she ordered him but it was no use Ryan moved like he was water, with a death grip he pulled Gareth Lock down into the deathly depths of Sliver Lake...

Epilogue

Star West and Mrs Lock both clutched onto the rotted wood of the pier, desperately searching the still waters of Sliver Lake for their loved ones. Bubbles pierced the surface and Mrs Lock cried out with relief.

“Bobby!” Her son thrashed closer until he was in touching range, his mother scooped him out and held his wet body to her, weeping with joy, it seemed Gareth had given his life for his son’s. But none of that mattered to Star at the minute, she had to find Sam.

A dark form washed ashore yards from where they were, Star ran as fast as her legs would carry her. “Sam!” He was soaked through and coughing, spluttering for life.

“Remind me never to do that again!” He called out to her in a rough tone, as she dashed across the sand towards him. Star skidded to a stop.

“No.” She breathed as the man in black, who had been plaguing her dreams and every waking second materialised behind her brother. Sam’s side lopped grin feel when he saw his sister’s frozen expression of terror.

Star watched unable to move with fear, as the spectre placed a hand on Sam’s shoulder.

“Please...” She begged stumbling forwards, the dark clad figure grinned at her and a shiver ripped through her spine.

“No!” She screamed, her voice seemed to echo in her ears as the deadly vision vanished, along with her brother.

Star West was all alone...



The Ghost Files comes to a heart-stopping conclusion in.

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