



*A dark otherworld exists alongside ours. And the true meaning of our convictions lie in the rhythm of time. What we believe is time, may find its answer in our greatest fears.*

**HOODIE BLACK:**  
**Some doors should never be opened**  
by C.S. Caspar

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SOME DOORS SHOULD NEVER BE OPENED

# HOODIE BLACK



C S CASPAR

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First Edition

*There is a place that lies between Heaven and Hell;  
between this world and the other. Where those who  
linger in darkness can enter the light.*

# CRYSTAL CREEK AND THE MYSTERIOUS MR. GARLAND

2015

1

It's nine-thirty in the morning and I've been in the office for less than ten minutes when the intercom light starts blinking.

"Yes, Ilene."

"You've got a call Alex. It's Mr. Arthur Garland. He says he needs to talk to you urgently."

"Hello, Mr. Garland. What can I do for you?"

The old man on the phone sounded agitated. "Mr. Hunter, I have a strange case I'd like to offer you, but I cannot tell you any of the details over the phone. Will you meet with me today?"

I wasn't about to entertain what this strange case may involve. So, I replied. "Yes, I suppose so. Where would you like to meet, Mr. Garland?"

The voice almost whispered when it said. "It's rather urgent. I have given the address to your secretary and I would like to see you at two this afternoon. Does that suit you?"

While I listened to the man's voice, my profiling skills kicked in. Profiling people had become a force of habit. It all happened in seconds. With uncanny accuracy, I could discover character details most people missed. And right now, the man on the other end of the phone sounded like... Older than sixty. Foreign-educated... Perhaps... Garland's voice interrupted my thoughts.

"I assure you, Mr. Hunter, I will make it worth your while. So, I'll see you at two."

There was a click and the caller was gone.

Staring at the receiver for a moment considering the strange Mr. Garland. I decided there was something mysteriously off about the man. Something disturbing. But couldn't put my finger on exactly what it was. Nevertheless, a foreboding insight sparked by instinct made me stop for an instant, because I had the strangest feeling. However, the omen of doom didn't have any logical foundation. So, I engaged in the *'don't stress about what you can't change, fix or understand'* habit I'd picked up over time.

I opened a Google page on my computer and at the same time pressed the button on the intercom. "Ilene. Please bring in the address Garland gave you."

Two minutes later, Ilene walked into the office.

Holy hell. She was a beautiful woman and today, just like every other day. I couldn't stop myself from staring while she glided into the room on shiny black stilettos. Shoes that made no sound on the carpet. She moved around behind the desk and leaned over my shoulder, letting her forearm slightly brush against the fabric of my jacket. In this position, I got a magnified view of her cleavage. I also got a good whiff of her perfume. She quietly placed a manila folder right next to me.

Yeah, I know. I shouldn't have been looking ... and it was a bit of a tease. But I couldn't help it. I am pushing fifty and she is only twenty. I don't consider myself a dirty old man. So, using a mammoth amount of mind control. I averted my eyes and instead looked at the computer monitor.

"There you go Alex." She said, the smile never leaving her pretty face. Tapping the yellow manila folder with a perfectly long red fingernail. "The contract for the Crystal Creek property at Hexham... it arrived this morning."

Crystal Creek was an old abandoned estate about fifty miles out of Sydney, and frankly, I'd bought it entirely on impulse. Buying real estate, especially a house, sight unseen and online, was what I called crazy, and as it turned out, I had been right. Nevertheless, what had compelled me to do something so out of character wasn't going to become obvious until much later.

“Alex, this is the address Garland gave me. You’ll want to look at it.”

She placed the note on top of the manila folder. I mumbled something like a thank-you while my heart beat a little faster. Then I watched Ilene’s perfect figure make its way back out the office door.

I didn’t hire her because she was beautiful. That was just the bonus. Ilene was good at her job. I also knew her seductive body language was an innocent, natural display of feminine warmth, and her attraction to me was just my man ego playing tricks.

Looking back now. I’d have to say. This story begins to unfold a couple of months ago. After I met a strange guy in a bar. His arrival piloted the resulting decision to buy the house at Crystal Creek.

The man had been sitting next to me drinking beer when we struck up a conversation and later decided to have dinner together. Sometime after the meal we started talking about retirement and real estate and the conversation lead to the house for sale at Crystal Creek. The guy insisted I look it up and had written the listing number on a paper napkin. Come to think of it, he was a little too enthusiastic, harping on the idea. I brushed off the pushy attitude because I was tanked on beer and steak, and I didn’t take the napkin with the number on it when we parted company. Instead, I had memorized it.

Oddly, later, I couldn’t remember the guy’s name. Which for me is slightly disturbing, because we had spent the best part of four hours in conversation, and I’m not one to forget names. All I can remember is; he was an artist and the clothes he was wearing: A black hoodie jacket; blue jeans, a little too big, and black shiny shoe’s. *Shoes that could have come straight out of the early 1900s.*

The man had the most peculiar green eyes I’d ever seen. Luminescent, otherworldly eyes, distracting and mesmerizing. Those eyes, his clothes and the listing number for the property were all I vaguely recalled.

The fact-that I couldn’t remember his name, didn’t bother me at the time, but it should have.

The first item on my list of “to-do” in the office the next day was research Crystal Creek online. The house, built in the late 1800s, looked weatherworn. I studied the three photos taken from the outside. The first picture was of the front of the house and it captured a brief view of a wide lake behind the building, its borders laced with big old gum trees.

To the right of the frame; a boathouse. And as soon as I saw it. I knew I had to have it. The green-eyed guy had been right... It was the perfect place. A big old stone building with a slate roof and raised timber veranda all the way around. There was even a wide front entrance. The house, appeared unoccupied for years and needed repair, but nothing too serious. I liked it, and without considering what I was doing, I called the real estate agent, and in not so many words, demanded the man. “Go down there and put the sold sign out-front.”

At once I started making plans to renovate, and someday soon, pack up the private investigator business and move out there.

I picked up the note Ilene left on my desk and stared at it. *What the hell? This can't be right.* 1408 Crystal Creek Drive, Hexham. I pressed the intercom.

“Ilene, you got this address, right? Is this the address the old guy gave you?”

“Yes Alex, that’s the address he gave me. Is anything wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Ilene. But I... umm... Oh! Never-mind.”

“Will there be anything else Alex?”

“Yes, one more item ... Did Garland leave a phone number?”

“No ... no phone number. He declined when I asked.”

“Okay, thanks.” I sat for a few moments and continued to stare vacantly at the note. *Why on Earth would Garland want to meet me there?* Then on second thoughts ... I tore open the manila envelope and pulled out the contract where I saw the seller’s name. Arthur Garland. So, Arthur is the owner of Crystal Creek... interesting.

I looked at my wristwatch: nine forty-five. I’d already estimated it would take an hour to get to Crystal Creek from the city. That’s another



convincing reason I bought the house. Close to the city yet far enough for it not to be a problem commuting. Traffic at one in the afternoon should be light. Therefore, I could leave the city a little before one and arrive just on time. But first, I thought. I'd better do some research.

On the Google page, I entered "Arthur Garland." All the links listed were profiles and pictures. Nothing to follow; there wasn't anything suggesting whom the caller had been.

Next, I typed "1408 Crystal Creek" and an old newspaper article surfaced, dated 1861.

## CRYSTAL CREEK MYSTERY

By Detective Walter McFarland

About five miles outside the limits of Hexham stands a large farmhouse. This house has been vacant for two years before I saw it. The original owner, Victor Garland, disappeared without a trace and suggestion leads to possible murder. Evidence at the scene showed a struggle, but the whereabouts of his body and his disappearance remains unsolved. Later, the house and farm passed into the hands of his brother, Vincent Garland, believed to be an English gentleman. He too, a short time after taking possession of the property, vanished in strange circumstances. During my career as a detective. I have never encountered a mystery, such as the house at Crystal Creek. However, family members employed me to uncover reasons for the strange disappearances. Thus, I find myself embroiled in events that appear to take on a supernatural claim, rather than something explained with physical evidence. Hence, on the evening of 13 October 1861, I entered the farmhouse just after dusk. An event I felt compelled to do. During my sweep of the premises, and while I was wandering inside the rooms, doors started opening and shutting without anybody touching them. My heart began to jump so hard under my jacket and such was my panic, that it's a wonder it didn't knock a button off. And when I drew my six-shooter and fired half a dozen

shots clean through the door—making the all-fiercest row you ever heard—the doors just kept opening and shutting. I ran out of that house and I would not go there again for all the money in the state.

I read the old article with some fascination and then typed in “Detective Walter McFarland.” The following article appeared on-screen, also dated 1861.

## MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

Detective Walter McFarland has mysteriously disappeared from his apartment on 17 October 1861. Sources say he had been working on the case of the two Garland brothers who both went missing without a trace and under strange circumstances. It seems Walter McFarland has also vanished. Nothing personal appears removed from the man’s property, suggesting foul play. The only lead at present, is the eyewitness of Mrs. Matilde Brown, who lives opposite the apartments where Detective Walter McFarland resides. Constable Phil Sheridan took the following statement:

“Matilde Brown of 18 Waterford Street, Hexham, said, that at eleven thirty on the night of 16 October, while looking out her window on the second floor, she saw a hooded man enter McFarland’s building. The woman stated that she did not see the face of the intruder because, she said, ‘It was covered by a large black hood.’ Mrs. Brown also said, that while she was watching him, he suddenly turned and glared at her. So terrifying was the event that Mrs. Brown quickly pulled the drapes closed because, she said, ‘He gave her the shivers.’” Police are examining the case and welcome any information the public can provide.

*How very curious, I mused. Arthur Garland, is clearly a descendant of the Garlands, who went missing back in the late 1800s. And if this is the case? What is it? That he desperately wants to share.*

*It's obviously important. But what could be so important that he couldn't just tell me over the phone?* I knew these questions would not find reasonable answers until I met the man face-to-face. There wasn't anything else of interest on the computer.

I lounged in my leather desk chair and stared at the screen, wondering about how this day was starting to unfold, when a protesting gut began grumbling, momentarily distracting me. Another morning I'd missed breakfast. Not to deny any longer the most basic of human needs. I slid the note into my top pocket and headed out the door.

"Ilene. I'm going out for the rest of the day. Any appointments I have... cancel them."

Ilene smiled when she replied. "Then I'll see you tomorrow... and don't worry. I'll lock up before I leave."

I paused at the door. "One more item Ilene. I want you to go online and find everything you can about Arthur Garland, his family and a detective named Walter McFarland. Go back in history as far as you can."

Ilene wrote the names on her notepad and then nodded.

Once in the hall. I took the elevator. Three floors down and I was standing on the sidewalk in the sunshine. The moment I took a breath of fresh air, the irresistible scent of freshly baked bread demanded my attention. It's funny how the aroma of warm baked bread can make everything in the world seem right and good. It also gives me a craving for creamy butter, spread thick and dripping.

Immediately, I got the visual of my doctor frowning while waving the end of his stethoscope at me at my last check-up. "Lay off the fats Alex. You want to have a heart attack?" But right now, I was thinking, *Well, there are some passions that are just worth the risk. Can't live forever.*

Putting the old Doc's words in the box and filing it somewhere at the back of my brain. I headed north down the sidewalk making tracks to the nearby bakery. *I'll grab a bite to eat and out to Crystal Creek. Then take a drive around town and put eyeballs on the locals.* Realizing, in that moment. I had already changed my mind about how the day was going to play out.

Waiting in line for about twenty minutes, just to get a hot ham roll was something I was looking forward to leaving behind when I moved to the country. Small towns don't entertain long waiting periods at service counters.

I ate the roll on the move and unconsciously headed for the car park. At this point I couldn't put my finger on the reason I had decided to leave early. It may have been the police sirens I heard a moment ago. Or jostling with people traffic on the sidewalk. But something had sparked the overwhelming feeling, I needed to get going. However, I didn't give it another thought, and what did it matter anyway?

### 3

By the time my new black BMW was crawling through traffic down Picton Street, it was about ten-thirty, and by eleven-fifteen, I was on Highway one. Heading out of the city.

I'd bought the BMW three months ago. Courtesy of my rich clients. I'd never bought a new car before. Never could afford one. A career as a police officer doesn't exactly place you on the Fortune 500 list and neither does being a private detective. But the latter has better fringe benefits.

Driving along the highway. I could smell the new leather odor. It mingled with the fresh country air, all care of the open windows. The sensation was like having twenty years removed from my age. I turned on the radio and Don McLean's 'American Pie' was playing, so I turned up the volume and started singing along, thrilled with how life was going just fine for me right now.

Later, after the song ended. My thoughts returned to those two old newspaper clippings I read earlier that morning. Mysterious disappearances. Murder and a house with a history.

I should have known nothing turns out like the dreams we imagine. Those perfect scenes played out in your mind like a movie of oncoming events. Where the passage of imagination is a straight road, and home is sunny mornings and red skies in the afternoon. Sitting out on the lake

while the boat rocks gently and dinner is swimming under the hull. Yeah, I should have known that letting your guard down and allowing yourself the liberty to dream only brings pain and regret.

• • •

When I was turning off the highway heading down the service road that led straight into Hexham. I had already formed a list of questions I was going to ask Garland about the house. Of course, after I asked about the business of what the job was first.

Six miles down the one-lane road and the small town of Hexham appeared. I was getting hungry again, and no sooner did the thought cross my mind, when I saw a little café. The neon sign out-front read. ‘Sally’s Bake House’ and by simple observation it looked like the only café in town. I parked the BMW. No battling to find parking here. There was plenty.

Exiting the vehicle. I checked my watch. Half past one in the afternoon. *What the hell?* I glared at the watch almost willing my eyes to see different. *This can’t be right. I left the city at eleven fifteen, and sure as hell, I haven’t traveled more than an hour. Which should make the time around twelve fifteen. There is no way I have been driving for two hours.*

I tapped the glass on the watch. *Like that was going to make any difference.* Shaking my head in disbelief. I walked into the quiet café. The place was empty except for a single female server standing at the counter. I scanned the room for a wall clock and it wasn’t long before I found it. *One-thirty... Where did the extra hour go?* Being a stable-minded routine guy. Losing time and buying unseen houses wasn’t specifically typical behavior. I was starting to wonder whether there may be something seriously wrong going on inside my head, and should schedule another physical with the Doc ... I must have looked like a stunned mullet when the pretty girl behind the counter asked. “Is everything all right, sir?”

Shaken into the present moment. I thumbed at the clock. “Is that clock up there showing the right time?”

She looked up at the wall clock then down at her wristwatch. “It sure is, sir. What can I get you?”

I hesitated for a second and then smiled. "Black coffee, two sugars, and a hot meat pie to go. Thank you."

Moments later. I walked out of the café heading down the street. *Okay, so where did I lose an hour?* I continued to ask myself. Knowing quite well, there are some questions that never get suitable answers. So I had to let it go. *Don't sweat the small stuff.* And anyway, I may have been wrong about the distance between Sydney and Crystal Creek. Even though, I knew this was unlikely.

For the next fifteen minutes, I strolled up and down the sidewalk. This little historic town of Hexham. Settled around the early 1800s, was as quiet as a mouse. Many stores were typical; clothing, white goods, a shoe shop, and the usual haberdashery. Every small-town has one. A small clothing store, Annie's Fashions and a local butcher. A reasonably-sized country hospital. A red-bricked English-style courthouse, and of course... the big old Royal Arms Pub. Found at the far end of the street on the corner. As they often are. Passing the establishment. I noticed three dusty pickups parked out-front. The owners inside, obviously having a few cold beers to stem their thirst, while leaving their working dogs chained on the hot sidewalk, panting for a little shade and some water.

The pub, with its weathered and dull whitewash exterior, demanded attention. And typical, in most small towns. It was biggest building on the street. That was about all there was to see of Hexham.

It was quiet at this hour, and I noticed most of the floaters beating the pavement were in their sixties or older. There was one young woman who caught my attention, and only because the kid she was dragging behind her was screaming his guts out.

When I returned to the BMW, I had seen all there was to see. So again, I checked my watch ... It was five minutes to two. I got in the car and started the engine.

When the BMW turned into the driveway of 1408 Crystal Creek, it was half past two. What should have taken five minutes for the distance had exploded into half an hour.

Now I was sure something was amiss and it wasn't in my head. However, I had to file it for later examination. Because, looking at the people already at the house. I knew I had other things to think about.

## 4

Viewing the house as the BMW cruised slowly into the drive satisfied all my expectations. The lake was out back, offering a view of the far bank. It looked a lot bigger than it had in the photographs. The paint on the timber around the windows was weatherworn and crumbling, and the same with the stone walls. Moss and rot had destroyed the old mortar. Nothing a little hard work and some time and money couldn't fix.

A shiny blue Ford sedan basked in the afternoon sun. Standing by the driver's door with his hands crossed above his pelvis was a puffed-up lobster of a man. Wearing a suitably accentuating dark blue suit. I eyed the lobster for a moment, then focused on the old man on the porch sitting in a wheelchair. The thin, frail old man sat slightly stooped underneath what appeared to be a white golfer's hat, and what's left of one's hair at that age. Wispy strands of silver. The old man was wearing a white suit with a black necktie and rimless glasses.

If he hadn't been in a wheelchair. I would have thought he'd just stepped off the bowls green.

The old man didn't take his eyes off me as I pulled in behind the Ford and turned off the engine. I estimated his age, assuming it to be around seventy. Maybe-more. Resting on the man's lap. I could see a yellow manila folder.

I looked back at the lobster. Obviously, the big Russian sporting the flattop crew cut and standing stock-still by the car was the driver, and the old guy on the porch was Mr. Garland.

Apart from the time discrepancies. I was in a good mood. And I was thinking, with ample triviality. *Let the story begin and the money roll in.*

The lobster guy watched me closely as I stepped out of my car. I was aware he was taking score and I looked straight back at him, posing the same clichéd measured eye contact. Then nodded my hello.

Not a muscle moved in the guy's overly morbid face. He just nodded back, offering the same courtesy stare that replied. *I've got my eye on you.* The direct eye contact tethered for a second. But seconds count. And a-lot-of talk is offered with one easy stare.

The lobster shifted his blue eyes to the old man in the wheelchair. A little too obvious to be impartial. And I knew he still watched me through his peripheral vision.

Garland waved a hand at the driver and ordered. "Boris, you can leave now. But be sure to be back by three-thirty sharp."

*Of course,* I thought. *Boris... It had to be Boris.* Garland looked like old money and until now, my attitude hadn't changed.

"Mr. Garland... Hello," I said, as I approached the porch smiling. Garland just raised his hand in salute, but did not otherwise respond. He, like his driver, looked morbid.

A warning sounded in my brain. The same counsel I had learned to listen to over the years. *Watch your back, shit's coming.* This gut reaction demanded I turn back and look at Boris who had started the Fords engine, and while the car idled, made no move to leave. Instead, he stared right back at me and I didn't like the look on his face. He was no simple driver; he was a hell of a lot more than that.

I arrived at the bottom of the first step that led onto the front porch where I got a better look at Garland's face. He was deeply troubled and his trouble had nothing to do with infidelity. Garland had that haunted look about him. It's the way someone looks when they're scared. The fear an unprepared person can't shake off, because the information is horrifyingly grotesque. Like the time the Doc says. "You're going to die and there isn't anything you, or anyone else can do about it."

I had a fair idea about what happens in your brain when you know the unavoidable end is imminent. And it's not just the white coat with the sad eyes that's telling you-you've got cancer and the grim reaper is standing at your door, so you better get your life in order. Because it's a mood less tangible or straightforward. It's the threat of a horrible death you know is in the cards. But you don't know where it's



going to come from. I could smell death scaring this man in his wheelchair, and it didn't have anything to do with his age or an illness.

Still, it doesn't pay to assume. Not in my line of business. So, I'll just have to wait and see. Although-obviously, the fear was genuine.

Distracted by my thoughts, I stumbled on the first step. "Oops, clumsy me." Garland's deathly pale face looked at me, then he smiled, revealing a fine set of false white teeth. A moment later, I had the gut reaction the next hour was going to be extremely interesting.

"Better watch your step, Mr. Hunter, and thank you for coming... even though you are a little late."

"Yeah ... Sorry about that. I've been having problems with time all day."

Garland's grin got a little wider when he looked at me, and his expression revealed he knew something about time problems. But he didn't say anything. Instead, he made moves to turn his wheelchair around.

"Here, let me get that." I offered while brushing past him and opening the front door. Then standing back, allowing Garland to enter first. I watched him roll in the door, and when we entered the kitchen. I had a seriously rotten feeling about the insides of this house. Something was definitely-off about it. And for the first time. I felt I had made one of the biggest mistakes of my life.

## 5

"I had Boris open the windows soon after we arrived Mr. Hunter... un-lived in, locked-up houses need an airing wouldn't you agree?"

"Please, Mr. Garland, call me Alex." I replied. "And yes, they do."

Garland said. "Follow me."

The house inside had old furnishings, and what was obvious, hid under dusty white sheets. While we moved through the rooms. The old man's wheelchair made a slight, but annoying, squeak. We passed through a large and modest kitchen where all the appliances looked old and ready for an upgrade. The cupboards were shabby and the tiled floor, cracked and filthy. *It appears I'm going to need a new kitchen.* The thought distracting me from that annoying squeak.

To the left of the kitchen and through a small hallway, we entered what was a fair-sized dining room. Not much to see but peeling wallpaper and no furniture except one empty tallboy set back in a corner. As I moved past the open door, I noticed bullet holes. There were six. Then I remembered the article I had read earlier that morning. The shots McFarland fired more than a hundred and fifty years ago. I paused to run my fingers over the holes scaring the timber, then moved on, following the squeaking wheelchair. A moment later I was opening two large and heavy timber doors that led to a spacious lounge room.

The room was as big as a dance hall, though poorly lit. Only one small window facing west with a view onto the lake. My immediate thought. *Knock through the wall and open the place. A couple of clear glass sliding doors leading out onto the porch...*

Garland's voice sounded in the distance. "Please sit down."

The old man had positioned his wheelchair in front of a button-holed brown leather two-seat couch. A dusty white cover, removed earlier, was now a discarded crumpled pile in the far corner of the room. Behind Garland was the south facing wall. I couldn't see the wall because someone had attached a large painter's sheet from ceiling to floor, hiding it, and I couldn't help wondering what was behind that sheet.

Garland followed my eyes with his, and as if reading my thoughts said. "We will get to what's behind the sheet in time... Alex."

This time he said my name with a drawl, Al ... ex. Now he had my full attention. It may be my tardiness that had annoyed the old man more than I suspected. Or ... was he trying to stage coming events?

With a shaking hand. Garland lifted the yellow manila folder off his lap and threw it onto the large coffee table positioned between us; it landed with a slap. "We will also get to that in time." He added.

I nodded and made eye contact.

Garland began with a question. "You know my name, and if you're as good as I think you are... You have undoubtedly done a little research before leaving your office this morning. Am I, right?"

Taken by surprise, I thought. *Clever old coot.*

“Yes, as a matter of fact. I did spend a few moments online doing a little research.”

“What did you find?” He persisted.

“Well, not much... I didn’t have anything but your name to go by.”

“Get to it, man.” Garland urged testily and then looked at his wristwatch.

The old man’s abrupt attitude demanded notice, so I leaned toward him and said. “Okay, I found a couple of old newspaper articles referring to what I am assuming are ancestors of yours. Two brothers in different circumstances went missing or murdered in this house or nearby in the late 1800s. It wasn’t clear and frankly, I didn’t linger. It was ancient history until I looked at the contract for this place where I found your name. So, I’m assuming you are a relative of these men, and right now, I believe you have a little more to disclose about them and about this house.”

“Did you find anything else?” Garland asked curiously.

“Like I said Mr. Garland. I didn’t linger and thought I best leave the explanations for our meeting. I didn’t want to entertain assumptions about what might be the reason you called me here today.”

Garland rubbed his chin and his eyes revealed he was thinking about what he was going to say next.

I watched him closely.

“Please Alex, open the manila folder and take out the contents.”

I opened the envelope and replaced the folder on the coffee table. Garland rolled his wheelchair closer.

In my hands were a series of photographs.

“Take a good look at the top picture Mr. Hunter.”

I obediently lifted the faded old photo from the top of the pile and put the rest back on the coffee table. The people posing for the camera were classic 1800s and of course with typically morbid, unsmiling faces.

Arthur leaned back in his wheelchair. “The man on the far right is my great-grandfather, Victor Garland. He’s the man you read about in the article.”

I viewed the photograph and then looked up at the old man. "Yes. Victor Garland. Mysteriously disappears in 1859."

Garland pointed a shaking finger. "The three women are his wife, Madeline—she is standing next to him on the right. The others are his two daughters. Mary and Sonia. The boy in front is Harrison. The youngest and Victor's only son. Harrison is five years old in that photograph. Taken a week before he disappeared." Garland paused while he watched me examine the photo, and when he saw the question form on my lips. He held up his hand telling me to wait.

Harrison was the only person in the photograph uninterested in making good with the photographer. He donned socks pulled up to his knees, pantaloons and a shirt buttoned up tight under his chin. The photograph was color-enhanced, so, I'm guessing his clothing was white or cream and his hair fair. Cut bob style. Large round period buttons closed the short jacket he was wearing. Harrison was crouching on his haunches. In one hand was a glass jar. In the other, a stick, or what could have been a straight branch. He was scribbling something in the earth. In the photo, of course, it was illegible.

"You said this kid went missing? Nothing came up about his disappearance when I searched the computer this morning."

"It wasn't reported." Garland muttered and then continued. "Now, Alex. I want you to look a little closer at the photograph... Do you see anyone else?"

*Is this a trick question?* I thought, but instead complied and scanned the picture again.

The family home was large and two stories high. The picture taken in front of the house, overall, looked neat and tidy and made exclusively of precisely packed and stacked bluestone cubes. It was typical of houses granted to upper-class English families. Typical with its white window frames and manicured flower beds that bordered the foundations at the front, and I'm assuming, the same flower beds were out back. On the left side of the house were two large trees, and I'm guessing, oak or elm. The trees were a contrast to the surrounding manicured garden, giving it that parkland feature.

Further in the background, beyond the short grass, stood a thick forest of organized pine trees. It appeared planted by human design

and not by nature's haphazard unpredictability. On the right of the photo was another single tree, like the two on the left. The photo, taken in autumn. Portrayed faded leaves colored yellow and brown. Many had already fallen to the grass under the canopies, carpeting the ground around the trunks. I continued to look carefully at the house, searching for what I may have missed. My eyes scanned the windows, looking for the ghostly face. *It's always the creepy shadowed figure in the window* I thought, with some amusement. However, I didn't see any faces or shadows.

My eyes started skirting the trees, bushes and flower beds. I saw nothing unusual. After a few minutes, I looked at Garland. "I don't see anyone else in this picture. But since you have asked. I'm clearly not looking hard enough."

Garland had a smug look on his face when he insisted. "Look again and this time, you'll find what you're looking for." Then he quietly added. "Nobody sees it the first time."

If that comment wasn't going to get my full attention, nothing was. I took my reading glasses from inside my jacket and put them on. Then held the picture up close. This time, scanning every detail in slow motion. When out of nowhere, I saw it! Convinced it hadn't been there before ... Standing to the left of the house. Partially hidden behind one of the trees was a dark figure.

The frightening presence wore a black hooded cloak. However, where his face should have been... left nothing but a black hole. In one visible hand, he was holding a shiny curved blade. A short sword of sorts. Its tip almost touching the ground. The figure didn't appear taller than the average teenager. What I mean is... he didn't look like a man; he wasn't tall enough nor broad enough. I studied the presence for long moments, before I distinctly felt the impression of malevolence. Evil seemed attached to it. And at once, I remembered what Matilde Browne said in that article. "He gave me the shivers." I was feeling the same way right now.

"What the blazes is that? I mean, who the hell is that and how...?" Words stumbled out of my mouth.

Garland raised his hand and sighed. “That is Hoodie Black, and before you ask me any other questions I need to tell you a story. Later you can ask me anything you want.”

I nodded, resisting the impulse to voice what was on my mind. I stared at the picture again, and this time, the menacing hooded specter was gone.

Garland waited and watched as I turned the photo over and over. I examined the back. The sides. Then flipped it. But there was nothing. No tricks. No magic formula. Just the simple unassuming and slightly faded photograph.

Garland sighed audibly. “Let me start at the beginning.”

I slumped back on the couch. My mind had gone full throttle and into overdrive. None of this was making any sense, and I was feeling like the old man was playing me. Although I couldn’t understand the motivation. *Who the hell is that figure I saw in the photo, and how did he appear and then disappear? What did the old man mean by... Nobody sees it the first time? Who else has seen it? And what does this man want from me?* A million questions were racing through my mind when abruptly everything went quiet, and I had a nasty suspicion I wasn’t going to enjoy Garland’s next story.

## 6

Garland exhaled, scratched under his hat and began. “The picture was taken just outside Glastonbury England in 1835 twenty-six years before Victor disappeared. Two years later, his brother Vincent was also going to disappear, and they weren’t the only ones. Needless-to-say, I’m now seventy-one and I fear something similar may happen to me. What you need to understand Alex, is that all the Garland men ...my father and some of the women—not counting other people connected to my family—have, over the years, disappeared without a trace. What has befallen them nobody knows but me, and what I do know is... it’s all connected and leads back to Harrison and this Hoodie Black figure. The apparition you just saw in the photograph.”

I looked at the man and he appeared both frightened and saddened. So, I asked him if he wanted a glass of water, but he declined saying, “Please, no questions until later Alex.”

All good feelings had now exited the scene. I leaned back on the couch still holding the photo and listened as Garland recounted the long story of his family and the mysterious happenings that lead deep into history and the supernatural.

Now, as you already know. I'm a no-nonsense practical man, and my opinion of what I was hearing was little more than absolute baloney. But I decided to humor the man and at the same time keep an open mind. Another item the police force taught me. Listen first... Judge later. However, inside everyone's mind is a sealed box and contained inside that box is everything we don't believe in. Because our eyes have never seen what our mind cannot imagine.

The continuing story, as unbelievable as it develops, confirms all the contents of the box. And it appears the box is nothing but wasted space. I was now entering a world of hurt and way in over my head.

• • •

The old man's voice sounded tired when he started his story and listening to him confirmed it was going to be a long one. Over the course of the next hour and a half I had to check myself to confirm I wasn't dreaming the whole event. The old man's English drawl sounded like hissing gunpowder when it unfolded the most incredulous and unbelievable tale I had ever heard, and these macabre events would lead me deep into hell.

Arthur shifted in his wheelchair then folded his hands in his lap.

"Some years ago," he began, "I discovered a diary written by my great-great-grandfather, George Garland. You see Alex, for generations my family has collected a vast assortment of books. Many written by famous authors and many are very valuable. This library... never cataloged... was well overdue, and this decision brought the diary to light. Before then, no one knew it existed. My great-great-grandfather, George started his diary when he was still a boy ... around the time the European witch trials were ending." Here he paused for a moment and then said. "Did you know they went on for more than three hundred years?"

Arthur was talking about a time when the barbarity of witch-cult worshipers ran wild with demon spirits and malignant fiends. Three hundred years of witch-hunts had little to do with science. It was the church and impoverished nobles; the dirty inquisitors that started the whole thing going. Those harbingers of evil and death, got rich torturing and burning the innocent. Because if you were one of the unlucky accused. You had to pay for your own barbeque. Then either the crown or the church took your house, your cows and pigs, and anything else you happened to own.

A hell of a lot of nobles got fat feeding off the Devil. Their evil deeds filling personal bowls with the blood of the innocent ... and as Arthur mentioned. Three hundred years of cooking for the books... I'd say it's still paying dividends.

I nodded, but Arthur didn't wait for an answer. Instead he asked, "Do you believe in curses Alex?"

"Can't say that I do." I replied.

"Well, neither did I until I read George's diary, and even though I found it hard to believe. Some events are not so easily explained away with logic."



# GEORGE'S DIARY

1758

1

George, roused from his murderous daydream by a loud banging on the door, quickly returned the small blue vial he'd been examining; gently placing it back into the top drawer of his writing desk. Then closed his diary and said. "Come in."

His father Robert, stormed into the room, scowling. "I told you to get rid of that squatter from Earwig Forest a week ago. Why haven't you done it? I've just received another complaint about a missing child."

"Why don't we just let the authorities deal with it?" George grumbled.

George was the eldest son of Robert and Christie Garland, and firstborn and heir to the family lands and fortune.

Robert's palm hit the top of the desk with a thud. "Because I told *you* to handle it."

George leaned back in his chair and stared at his father, uninterested and rather- bored.

Standing over the desk, Robert glared. He loathed his son's indifference.

"If you want me to trust you. Then you better be prepared to get your hands dirty. I want you to go out, right now, and evict that scum of a man who is causing all the trouble among the squatters. I want you to find out if he has anything to do with the missing children."

"Come on father. You know the squatters are full of stupid stories about dogs and demons."

“Stories don’t come from nowhere son, and the facts are... There have been plenty of missing children. The people living on these lands are our responsibility. As guardians. We are the law and authority, and have the right to deal with events as we see fit. If you expect to inherit. Then you better learn the rules.”

“I know the rules father. But the world is changing and you are still stubborn.”

Robert seethed and swiped the diary off the table where it fell on the floor with a slap. “Dammit George, if you don’t change your attitude I will give the keys to the kingdom to your brother William.”

George, expecting this reaction because he’d heard it all before, sat up straight and frowned. “William is an idiot and you know it.”

“You’re the idiot. How many times have I told you to stop gambling? After generations of hard work. I won’t see you put us all in the poorhouse because you can’t keep control of yourself.”

“We are not having this conversation again father.” Replied George blowing a gut full of air and rolling his eyes.

Incensed, Robert stared at his son for long moments then growled. “I’ve had enough and I’m not going to tell you again. Take some men and go and do what I have asked. I want your report on the matter by this evening.” Robert turned and stormed out of the room, leaving the door slamming behind him.

George, his mind cold as ice, sat up, leaned forward, and reopened the top drawer. Where once again, he lifted the blue vial. Standing and moving to the liquor tray, and without so much as a second thought, he poured the contents of the vial into the whiskey decanter. Rolling the whiskey around for a few moments, he muttered, “It’s time for a new lord.” Capping the blue vial and placing the empty vessel into his coat pocket. George left the library office and made his way to the stables.

“Alexander! And you... David,” he called, pointing to the fat balding overseer. “Come with me and bring that rope. We are going for a little ride.” The overseer reached for the thick coil of rope resting on a large hook fixed on the stable wall, then tied it to his horse’s saddle. Meanwhile, George mounted his gray stallion. The two men dropped what they were doing and without question followed suit,

mounting their own horses. A short time later. Three men at a slow gallop, rode out of the manor grounds heading for Earwig Forest.

Human nature argues that people are innately good, but through personal experience, they learn how to behave badly. George, on the contrary, was born wicked. He was what is called: a noble savage. A man who never learned affection or love, and had no ability for empathy. He didn't care, not in the slightest, about how his behavior affected others. Wherever he went. George left a trail of immoral malice, cruelty, and egotism. To him, human beings were simply below scum and subjects of stupidity and weakness.

George knew exactly where to find Black Jack. He was aware the man lived-in a small cave some distance from the village, where squatters for centuries had made their home. No one knew how long Black Jack had lived there, and until recently, no one really-cared, least of all George. However, he had heard the stories about the missing children, but believed the squatters were an ignorant, fearful people, who believed witchcraft was the answer to anything and everything unusual. Poverty and isolation always spread hysteria.

White slave traders had already been reported in the area. The logical answer to any abductions, including the missing children. Nevertheless, to appease his father and settle the squatter's fears. He intended to hang the man from the nearest tree. Whether-or-not he was guilty.

An hour later, the three men rode through the squatter's village without taking much notice of its inhabitants. Most of the villagers watched the horses and their riders passing at a slow walk and each villager calculating in his or her mind, the reason the riders had come. Some had satisfied grins on their faces and others looked grim.

George's gray horse led the other two. And when George noticed an attractive young woman standing in a field, holding a basket full of freshly picked beans. He decided at once, he would be making another more informal visit to the village in the coming days.

The young woman smiled at him, and George returned the gesture with eyes that undressed her. She blushed, but otherwise did

not look away, tempting George to come on in. He took her eyes and body language as an invitation, and one he would soon fulfil.

She wouldn't be the first peasant woman he'd sullied, and if she managed to stay barren for at least a reasonable amount of time. He would get the most out of his fantasies. But once she was pregnant. Disposal would be necessary.

George gloated when he thought of the small graveyard hidden outside family lands in Penrith Forest, where the rotting corpses of four dirty little pregnant whores lay buried in the ground, unnoticed and forgotten. Bastard children were not something father would approve of, and neither would his bride to be. The fat Eleanor Granger. Daughter of the most powerful family in England and vastly richer than the Garlands. Her dowry alone would be more than enough to pay off his gambling debts. The thought of paying his debts inspired another idea. He must insist on speeding up the wedding date. Eleanor, in four months, was to turn sixteen. He would wed her as soon as possible, and with father gone long before then, he'd guarantee his future as head of the Garland empire.

George planned to get Eleanor pregnant at once, then continue his whoring with the village girls. Eleanor may be the daughter of the wealthiest man in England and his betrothed, but she was also the ugliest girl he ever saw. Planting a child in Eleanor was going to involve gallons of wine followed by an enormous amount of willpower.

A windy dusk began to blow as the riders left the village and its sights behind. Looking toward the sky, and heading in their direction, George saw dark clouds spreading from the east. And while the men and their horses entered Earwig Forest, a noticeable cooling in the air stung their faces and ruffled the horses' manes. Not long after, the distant sounds of thunder and lightning carried warnings of bad weather to come.

By-the-time the men entered the clearing close to the cave believed to be Black Jack's residence, tiny droplets of water rattled the forest canopy.

Standing outside the cave and hovering over a small open fire that smelt of roasting meat, stood a feral, wiry man. The dark shape

illuminated by the red glow of the fire confirmed he was wearing a black cloak with a large pointed hood pulled over his face, hiding it from view.

The creature was short and slightly hunched over. Immediately, George felt a foreboding chill creep through his body. An omen of doom he would later regret. Because it had nothing to do with the weather. The man was not human.

Although the impression hovered uncomfortably close to his mind, he gathered his wits and said. "Black Jack... Is that your name?"

Meanwhile, the two other men moved their horses on either side of the fire and dismounted.

The small hooded creature raised his head and glared viciously at George, offering a snide grin. George, when able to see the hideous face, recoiled in horror, involuntarily jerking on the reins. His horse, biting on the bit, violently threw up its head, stomping a foreleg.

The horrible little man had a long white nose. It dangled bent and a little to the left. Far too big and heavy for its thin face. The nose appeared glued on haphazardly by a child. Two huge nostrils formed enormous black caverns where long black hairs dangled like dead and withered worms. One eye was pitch-black and the other snow-white. The creature's face was deathly pale, with skin stretched so tight the head could easily be mistaken for a dead man's skull. Sharp teeth protruded from an overshot jaw where they had cut indents on his lower lip. Time had allowed putrid sores to fester in those tears and yellow pus wept onto a chin too large and diseased to be a part of the face.

Gulping down disgust, George repeated his question. "I said. Are you the man they call Black Jack?"

Licking a pointed and grotesque black and blue tongue in and out of his mouth. The creature sucked in air and pus. "And what if I am?" He sniveled.

This gesturing hastened George's already weakened stomach to dry retch. The other two men also swallowed oncoming vomit at the sight.

"Seize him." Commanded George.

Alexander and David glanced at one another briefly, sharing a loathing thought, where touching the diseased figure would taint them forever. However, they obeyed and had soon secured him. George dismounted, then moved to recover the rope from David's bay horse. In a moment, he'd thrown one end over a thick branch of a nearby oak tree, tying a noose, and the other end he fixed to the pommel of the gray stallion's saddle.

"Bring the cretin here." He demanded.

"What, no trial?" Slobbered Jack. "You can't hang me. I haven't done anything." Jack, although he knew the end was near, did not struggle against his captors while they shoved him roughly-toward the rope.

"The-fact-that a hideous and ugly creature like you lives... is enough reason to hang you." George barked.

The men tied Jack's gnarled and warted hands behind his back, and secured the noose around his neck. George moved forward with controlled effort. Forcing himself to stand close to the creature. Then, following the usual protocol, more for the sake of the two men who had escorted him, than for any other reason. He declared, "Black Jack, as lord of these lands. I charge you with kidnapping and thievery. What say you... in your defense?"

Jack dribbled and spat yellow goo. Some landed on George's boots, forcing him to step back in disgust.

"You're not lord yet... You stinking sperm of a soon-to-be-dead father. I know what you have done... MURDERER."

George instantly paled and then maddened while he didn't fail-to see the questioning looks his men formed between furrowed brows, but he recovered quickly.

"Shut this son of a whore up." George's jaw tightened angrily, and without another single thought. He slapped Jack as hard as he could across the face. Three teeth dislodged themselves and fell onto the dirt while the left section of Jack's putrid chin tore open. Now held only by a small shred of skin, it dangled loosely on his face.

"Ugh! You're disgusting!" Exclaimed George and took two steps away.

“Disgusting is what you did to those once-pretty little girls now rotting in the earth. An’ all because their bellies were filled with the stain you put in there.” Spat Black Jack.

“I’ll add filthy liar to the charges. Shut him up.” Growled George nodding to David.

The overseer swung a hard fist into Jack’s head and when Jack howled in pain, nearby birds left the canopies of the trees leaving chattered cries of despair scattered to the wind.

“String him up now.” George roared.

“Wait.” Cried Jack. “I have one more thing to say before you and all your progeny is cursed forever.”

Ignoring the threat, George growled. “Shut your stinking mouth, you foul beast... Hang him.” He ordered.

Alexander let go of his prisoner and moved to the gray stallion’s head. Then, taking hold of the bridle, he led the horse away at a fast trot. The rope tightened and Jack’s feet left the ground where he began to gag, then choke, as the noose squeezed around his neck.

“I’ll be back and then you’ll be sorry.” Jack gurgled only moments before his eyes were dangling on pale cheeks, leaving his black tongue wiggling and writhing like a trapped snake.

Spindly legs kicked and shook while the three men stood in silent horror watching the creature suffocate.

Surprisingly, it took a lot longer than expected for Jack to die. What seemed like eternal minutes passed, and the creature still kicked and wriggled. At which point, George had had enough. He drew his knife and stabbed Jack in the heart.

Jack’s body finally went limp.

“He is dead... take him down and burn the body.” George ordered his men.

Alexander and David exchanged glances, both still uncomfortable with what they had done, and both, curiously uneasy about the accusations Jack had cast at George.

*Who were the girls rotting in the earth? They wondered. Soon-to-be-dead father? What had the creature implied?* Robert, a man well-respected by all the squatters was a fair and good. He had always treated them kindly. Never judging their lower-class predicament.

George, on the other hand, was evil. He had, on more than one occasion, proven his cruelty. Nevertheless, the idea that George is a murderer, and of his father, seemed a little extreme.

The men, now tainted with Jack's accusations. Led George to believe they would be watching—not only him but his father Robert. If anything happened to Robert now... It wouldn't go unnoticed. George regretted having allowed Jack to open his mouth, and now carefully watched the two men as they moved around silently preparing Jack's body for burning. He noted their side glances and the questions in their eyes. George understood the consequences should these men gossip. He couldn't let them live.

It wasn't long before he realized the mistake he'd made earlier that morning. A hunting accident might have been the better choice. Hands-on killing of his own father was not like killing a pregnant wench. *So, it had to be poison.* However, in a small way, this idea momentarily consoled him. *And anyway...* he thought, *Authorities often accuse women as poisoners. If discovered that poison killed his father, and it came to blame. They would likely-find Mother or one of the women servants guilty.*

This thought satisfied George's sudden panic. Still, the men had to die. No loose ends.

The body of Black Jack had been burning for about ten minutes while the three men watched from a distance, all standing upwind as the stench was incredibly toxic.

At first, no one noticed the fluid black shadow watching them from inside the cave's mouth. Its red glowing eyes fixed on the scene.

And it was David, feeling those eyes on him, who was the first to see the shadow. "What in damnation is that?" He cried, pointing at the cave.

"A demon." Screamed Alexander and started running for his horse. George, seeing the distraction as the perfect opportunity, reacted instantly. He lunged at Alexander, who, by this time, had one foot in the stirrup and his hand on the pommel. In one swift thrust George stuck his knife into Alexander's back, slicing through his kidneys.



Alexander screamed. While David, still fixed to the spot staring at the apparition, turned just in time to see the bloodied blade as it descended into his throat, piercing through his jugular. Hot red blood squirted, pumping red liquid and spraying, then soaking George's crazed face. David's eyes bulged as he went down to his knees, both hands at his throat feebly trying to stem the flow, but it wasn't long before he bled out and was dead.

George was breathing heavily, letting the blood drip from his face and hair, and at this point, making no attempt to wipe it away.

"Well done, murderer." Said the creature still shadowed at the cave's entrance; its deadly voice howled through the forest like thunder. George looked up from David's limp body and stared at the presence... then realized it looked familiar. His eyes shifted to the smoking remnants of Jack's burned body but there was nothing but ashes.

"Jack?" He whispered.

"You can't kill what's already dead... Fool." The creature sniggered. Then it vanished, leaving behind the echo of its disappearing voice. "I'll see you soon... Friend."

The last comment coincided with a crash of lightning as it struck the ashes of Black Jack's cremation. Then George heard a door slam.

## 2

Garland continued recounting his great-great-grandfather's story. I listened with some fascination and dutifully noted the peasant's name—Black Jack. I was starting to wonder whether I knew where this tale was heading.

"Thirteen years passed in relative peace." Continued Arthur. "Long after the events in Earwig Forest were forgotten, and long since George had buried his murdered father. George married the fat and ugly but extremely rich Eleanor Granger, and everything in George's life seemed to be progressing nicely. By this time, he had four children—two sons and two daughters. And when his first daughter Isabel, turned thirteen, everything went to hell. George had no idea the

creature's cursory threats would come back to haunt him, and soon, all future generations were to pay the price for his actions."

"On the night before his oldest daughter's thirteenth birthday, and shortly before midnight. Isabel's screams awoke George and Eleanor. Rushing into her bedroom they saw a dark hooded man standing over Isabel's bed. The creature had one hand locked in her hair, and was fiercely shaking her head up and down. George instantly recognized the man as Black Jack, and when George rushed him. Jack, who had a moment earlier appeared solid, simply vanished away into black smoke. George's hands had passed right through him."

"A few days later. Isabel began having fits. At different times of the day they found her constantly crying. Then her body would contort. She would go stiff and her back would bend like a bow. Foaming at the mouth. Isabel would cry out for help."

"Her cries appeared squeezed from some failed horror and then silenced by some unseen force followed by acts of defending herself from a hidden attacker. Fighting and struggling with some invisible being. Her strength was incredible and it took four men to hold her down."

"But it wasn't until Isabel started vomiting quantities of knotted human hair—hair of different colors and lengths. Some curly, others long and straight. The bones of unnamed creatures. Fresh dung mixed with straw, and other objects—that George called for a doctor. However, after extensive examinations. The doctor couldn't offer a definite diagnosis."

"It hadn't been a week since the first vomiting incident, and this night, while George was sitting at his desk in the library. Isabel started another one of her fits. Soon it appeared she was choking on the leg bone of a chicken. When George tried to pull it out. He could feel something pulling it back into her throat. He says in his notes that he had to exert all his strength to extract the bone. Then after, when he asked Isabel how these strange objects got into her mouth. She said, she had no idea."

I had to admit the story was strange, but it was ancient history. And in my-opinion, complete fantasy. Isabel was undoubtedly an undiagnosed epileptic. However, it didn't explain vomiting shit, bones and human hair. But again ... I had to put that part of the story down to exaggeration.

Arthur continued. "It was after the incident with the chicken bone that George realized there was nothing physically wrong with his daughter. Now convinced, the Devil controlled Isabel, and in the face of such unexplainable events, forced George to believe. That Black Jack, or his demon spirit, had something to do with his daughter's possession."

"He set out with a priest and three trusted men. They rode into the forest to hunt Jack down. George was certain, Black Jack did not die by hanging, or burning, but was a demon who needed exorcising."

"Did George find him?" I asked.

"Not known..." Replied Arthur. "George never returned that day. Neither did the other men. They, and all their horses vanished without a trace. Isabel stopped having fits after her father disappeared. She returned to the normal little girl she had been before. Isabel had no memory of what had happened to her."

"Does your family still own Earwig Forest?"

"Yes." Replied Arthur. "And I did go and visit the cave where the supposed Black Jack lived."

Arthur's way of predicting my questions made me think he'd done all this before.

"What did you find?"

"I found nothing except..." Arthur shrugged and pointed to the pictures on the coffee table. "There is a photograph among the pile."

Soon I was holding the photo of the cave. It was nothing more than a rocky hole in the hill surrounded by scrub and tall trees.

Arthur pointed a gnarled and shaking finger. "Check the photo taken from the inside."

I found the photo and it revealed less than the first, except Arthur had taken a black marker and circled an anomaly on the stone wall. It looked like a doorknob.

"Is that?" I began.

"It is..." replied Arthur. "However, trying to explain the details at this point in the story will leave us lost in debate and nothing further will come to light. Time, right now is not our friend. Therefore, if I may... let me continue."

I filtered through the rest of the photos as Arthur moved on with the story.

### 3

"Harrison was playing in the garden out back, near the house, and in full view of the kitchen window, where his mother was preparing lunch. She remembered seeing him, with his glass jar only moments before he disappeared. Later, when none of the family members could find the boy. They called the police. Soon, all the villagers in Glastonbury set out to look for him. For six days, everyone searched. But they turned up nothing. Not a footprint. A piece of clothing. Nothing at all. It appeared Harrison had just vanished into thin air. But as it happened. On the eighth day. Harrison just walked through the back door of the family home. A little starved, dirty and bewildered, but otherwise unharmed."

"When a reasonable amount of time had expired. Victor, Madeline, and the attending police, tried to coax Harrison into explaining where he'd been for those eight days. But Harrison would never reveal anything. Not for the rest of his life. And for the rest of his life. The only audible sound he ever made was humming a tune which ended with ... *'Hoodie Black is on your back.'*

"During the missing days. Harrison had lost his mind. In fact, as the years rolled on. He never regained his full intellectual ability. He was, let's say, mentally tainted. In the preceding years, as he grew into a man, Harrison became a noted artist. Throughout the rest of his life he painted great works of art, and here, I must say. They undoubtedly enriched the Garland family fortunes. Nevertheless, no discovery and no reasonable explanation, revealed what had happened to him during those eight unaccounted days."

“When Harrison’s mother Madeline was fifty-five. She too disappeared. Presumed dead. The authorities discovered nothing, uncovering no trace of her whereabouts. No one knew where she had gone. Nor did they find a body. She’d vanished in a cloud of mystery. There was no clue where she could have gone, or why. And the vanishing must have been a sudden event. Police found a loaf of bread baking in the oven. Proof she’d been in the kitchen cooking at the time. Had she walked out? Or, did someone forcibly remove her? To this day, Madeline’s disappearance remains an unsolved mystery.”

“No one believed she would have left of her own free will. And in the following years, Victor and Madeline’s daughters, Mary and Sonia, married and moved away. Leaving poor Victor alone with his son. In a place where the villagers now called him Mad Harrison.”

“After his mother’s disappearance. Harrison became increasingly distant and withdrawn. Then his paintings became darker and darker and were no longer saleable. No one wanted to buy them and viewers now said, they reeked of evil. Therefore, Victor destroyed many of the latter paintings Harrison produced. And I cannot tell you how many of his earlier works have survived to this day. I believe, many are in private collections, but none are in the galleries. Inventory’s at the galleries list Harrison’s paintings ... as misplaced or missing. Leaving no logical explanation for their current whereabouts.”

I noticed Arthur was looking tired as he continued his story. Some of his conclusions didn’t add up. However, making assumptions, wasn’t my style. I leaned back in my seat and continued to listen.

“It was around the time Harrison was thirty that a young woman in Glastonbury went missing. Her name was Eva Bradshaw. I have a picture, and if you would be so inclined ...” Arthur’s shaking hand pointed towards the stack of photo’s.

I couldn’t help noting Arthurs appearance. It seemed his narration was making him less ... what I mean is, the strain was aging him before my eyes. But his story was beginning to draw me in. Still, I couldn’t help wondering what he wanted from me.

I picked up the rest of the photos and flipped through them one by one until I came to a picture of a simple but attractive young woman.

"That's the one." Said Arthur, then added, "Eva was sixteen at the time she vanished."

"Alex, I have spent a considerable amount of time and money, using every family and financial influence at my disposal to collect information and gather these photographs."

The old man's mysterious hints were starting to get on my nerves. And because I couldn't ask any questions. I took the notepad from the inside pocket of my jacket and started jotting down details I thought were important to the story. Afterward, I looked at Eva's photo. It was the typical period black-and-white. The woman was standing in a photographer's studio in front of a backdrop depicting a country scene. Garland was still speaking while I committed to memory the face of the young woman and then wrote her name in my notes.

"Historical reports state. That on several occasions. People saw Harrison trailing the woman through the streets, and approaching her when she crossed an open field on her way to the town marketplace. She wasn't welcoming to his advances and family warned Harrison to keep away. Sometime later, crossing that same field. She simply blinked out. The only clues found at the scene were two small items: a hair ribbon and a torn piece of her dress. But nothing else. Local authorities did suspected Harrison. But, because of the lack of evidence. They decided that no one had committed a crime. Their excuse rested on the notion that Eva had run away with a lover. This explanation didn't dissuade the young woman's parents and the villagers believing it was Harrison's doing. They wanted revenge and were hell-bent on lynching him to the nearest tree. As always... Villagers are fearful and suspicious about people not right in the head."

"Therefore, everything went to hell and all became a horrible witch-hunt against Harrison. Night after night, people appeared on Victor's doorstep with blazing torches and pitchforks, demanding blood. The attacks were relentless and Harrison was no longer able to

walk the streets. People assaulted, or physically attacked Harrison and those with him. Victor finally realized that neither he, nor his son, could continue their lives as they had once enjoyed. They could no longer live among the people, whom at one time, they had called friends. Nor could they live in their home in Glastonbury.”

“So, in the end. Victor paid quite a sum of money to disappear. He took Harrison with him and they found their way onto a ship bound for Australia.”

Garland looked around him with a touch of sadness before continuing. “Victor built this house, you know... He and Harrison lived here in solitude for several uneventful years. Harrison still painted the odd canvas and Victor took care of his son. Then, as time and fate would have it. Another local girl went missing. This time from nearby Hexham. For the first time, Victor began to question his son’s innocence.”

“You see Alex... Victor, until the second woman disappeared, had, without question, believed his son was innocent. However, as it turned out. That same night. When the girl from Hexham went missing. Harrison wasn’t in this house. Late that afternoon, Harrison had wandered off. When Victor discovered Harrison was missing. He searched for him, but without success. Then, when Harrison returned home. Sometime in the small hours of the morning. Victor had seen the visible dark spots on Harrison’s shirtsleeves. When he questioned his son about the blood on his shirt. Harrison growled at his father most horribly and chanted, as he always did. ‘Hoodie Black is on your back.’

“Victor realized he’d been wrong about his son and was in despair. What was he going to do with his murderous son? Now knowing, Harrison did have something to do with the missing Eva, and obviously, the missing woman from Hexham. Victor decided it would never happen again.”

“Victor knew he couldn’t let the police take Harrison and put him in jail, or a sanatorium. Such an event would destroy his family name and bring unspeakable horrors to his son. Therefore, without considering the consequences. He made a terrible decision. He locked

Harrison down in the basement ... and Mr. Hunter. That poor boy was to stay trapped in the cellar of this very house for the next five years."

"Victor, afraid of what would happen if any of the facts became public. Never again allowed Harrison to wander the gardens. Leave the house, or see the light of day. A cruel thing to do, I know, condemning his son to a more shocking prison than one the state would provide. Nevertheless, it isn't the worst part of the story. Because after Victor disappeared leaving Harrison locked-in the basement. Who would know Harrison existed? Who would set him free? The entrance to the basement is protected by a secret hidden trapdoor." He thumbed the direction over his shoulder. "It's hidden under a mat beneath that tallboy in the dining room."

"With Victor gone. It appeared Harrison awaited a horrible and lonely death. You can imagine Alex. How Harrison must have suffered when his father never returned, and he not knowing what was happening above him in this quiet house."

"I can't say that I do Mr. Garland." I replied with a little more than fascination while wondering if the bones of Harrison Garland were still rotting in the basement below me.

"Ah... leading us to believe... Poor Harrison. But as it turns out, it isn't so."

"What do you mean by that? Did Harrison escape?" I questioned.

"You'll know soon enough Alex."

Then, without taking a breath. He continued his story. I felt like pulling my hair out but avoided doing so.

"Victor's younger brother Vincent, inherited the Glastonbury home and lived there with his family until the Australian police department contacted him. Advising Vincent that Victor was missing..."

I interrupted with the obvious question. "If Victor and Harrison were living alone and no one knew much about them. How did the police discover Victor was missing?"

"As fate would have it." Replied Arthur. "Victor was friendly with the local grocer in Hexham. I believe his name was Harry Whitman." Arthur pointed to the coffee table... "There is a photograph of the man."



“Both men, being without wives met every Thursday night. Right here in this house for dinner, whiskey and a game of chess. The night Harry arrived for the prescribed routine get-together. He found the door open and Victor gone. This was out of character. Victor would not miss an appointment without telling Harry. So, Harry called the police.”

“Did Harry know about Harrison’s existence?”

“I don’t know.” Replied Arthur shaking his head. “If he did. He never mentioned it to the police.”

I nodded and wrote Harry’s name in my notes while Garland continued.

“Vincent, when told of his brother’s disappearance, and aware it was going to take three months for a ship to land in Australia, even if he left that very day. Vincent didn’t care. Even though he knew no one was going to let Harrison out in enough time before he starved to death. And due to the letter Vincent received from Victor...”

I interrupted Arthur with another question, but Garland again raised his hand.

“If you please Mr. Hunter, let me continue. I promise I will soon reveal everything. You won’t understand unless I tell you as much of the story as I can.”

I nodded and relaxed.

“Vincent never believed Harrison was innocent of Eva’s disappearance from Glastonbury, and he’d argued at length with his brother Victor to give up Harrison and hand him to the authorities. Victor staunchly refused. So, when Victor went missing. Vincent did not tell the police of Harrison’s existence. Instead, he chose to stay silent, and well... he let the boy rot. But Alex... I believe Vincent selected this course of action only because of the letter.”

“Victor’s letter contained details about Harrison. His connection to Hoodie Black, and what appeared at the time, to be murder.” Garland paused and then added. “Alex, I’ll have that glass of water now if you don’t mind.”

I found my way back to the kitchen and looked through the cupboards searching for a glass. The cupboards were dusty and old and still filled with several leftovers from the time Victor had lived in the house. Old crockery, some chipped plates and foodstuffs. Cutlery with yellow-bone handles filled top drawers. During my search, I found some interesting items: A can of beans dated 1861; the label had long faded but the date and the word “Beans” was still legible. Sauce peaches and other strange canned foodstuffs, scrambled in haphazard arrangements filling the dusty shelves. I wondered what slimy creature would exit from one of those cans if I opened it. Foodstuffs grown, picked and packaged more than one hundred and fifty years ago.

I finally found the glasses I was looking for. There were only four and made of that thick greenish smoky glass. The kind, these days, you only find in antique stores.

I took one and rinsed it under the tap. The water had that brown tinge and coughed a bit... Dirty pipes. I continued to run it for a while until it cleared. Filling the glass, I returned to the lounge where I offered it to Garland.

He took it with both shaking hands then emptied its contents, dribbling some down his chin and staining his white shirt.

I resumed my seat on the couch and listened to the slurping old man, hoping I wasn't going to end doing the same thing in some near future. The fact it was likely-if I lived that long, was disturbing.

Placing the empty vessel on the coffee table. Arthur smacked his lips. Wiped his chin with his handkerchief, took a deep breath and sighed. He adjusted his glasses and looked at his wristwatch.

“Three o'clock,” he said out loud. “I better wrap this up.”

“It would be two years before Vincent decided to leave England and make his way to Australia. His intent was to claim the house and see to Harrison's dead remains'. However, when he arrived he didn't find what he expected. The pile of bones of his murderous nephew was non-existent. There was nothing. No conclusive evidence that Harrison had died locked in the basement. Because he found the trapdoor firmly closed. Hidden under the tallboy just the way

Victor left it. Vincent had to move the tallboy to open the trap. His conclusion was... Harrison could not have escaped by that exit point. Once down in the basement. Victor found it rather-empty. Except for two strange details.”

“Painted on the west-facing wall was a life-size red door, depicted slightly ajar. Vincent, familiar with Harrison’s paintings, knew it must have been Harrison’s work. The basement was clean and Vincent could see timber shelves set against the south wall that held painter’s items—brushes, rolled canvases, and tins of oil paints, in all the various colors and shades. There was a small round table with two finely carved timber chairs tucked in. However, resting on the table was the most extraordinary object: a white plate, and in it, a half-eaten egg sandwich, that wasn’t old, or moldy, or left from long ago. It looked as if someone abandoned it only moments ago. It was still fresh.”

“Needless to say, the hairs on Vincent’s neck must have been standing on end. By good fortune, Vincent did record his findings in a letter he sent to his wife in England. You will find a photocopy of that letter at the bottom of the photographs.”

I’d started looking for the copy of Vincent’s letter when the old man said. “Please, Alex, not now. The letter isn’t important. Time is not our friend and there is a little more I need to explain.”

I stopped what I was doing, sat back and started writing.

Garland’s unrelenting voice continued.

“Vincent, would have arrived at the conclusion that Harrison had somehow escaped the basement, or he’d never been in there at all. Victor must have lied about that part. Still, nothing could explain the sandwich. There had been no sign of squatters, and remember, in Vincent’s eyes Harrison was a murderer. So, he didn’t concern himself with Harrison’s disappearance. Vincent had received a written communication, long before he left England where his brother Victor, offered the admission he’d accepted there was something wrong with his son.”

“Nevertheless, present events were leading into the supernatural. Vincent, being a practical man, obviously thought his brother had

gone as mad as Harrison. Nevertheless, Vincent hadn't been more than a month in this house when he also vanished without a trace."

"I know the question you must be asking yourself right now Alex ... What happened to Harrison? And at this point, I can only say... If it's true, and Harrison was in the basement when Victor disappeared. He must have escaped through the red door. The same way Black Jack did when he escaped into the door in his cave."

I wasn't buying this story, and I could see it was heading into the land of menacing psychosis.

"George hung and burned Black Jack," I declared.

"Did he?" Replied Arthur.

I rehashed George's story in my mind and nothing made much sense. Painted doorways that open and close. Harrison, an imbecile, and alleged-murderer who was... and then wasn't, locked in a basement. Fresh egg sandwiches left in plates where no one should live. A few old letters. Conceivably. Written by two madmen. The tale seemed rootless. However, I had to play along, just to see where this story was heading... At least for now.

"So what you're implying Arthur, is you think Black Jack was not human. He didn't die by hanging, and instead, is this supernatural figure called Hoodie Black. An unnatural creature that uses doorways to move around?"

"I don't know," replied Arthur. "But you're right about one detail... We are venturing into the supernatural."

"Were the bodies of Eva and the woman from Hexham ever found?"

"Sadly, no." Garland shook his head. "The bodies have vanished and remain unsolved cold cases."

"Am I to assume that you want me to do some investigations into these cold cases?"

"No, that won't be necessary Mr. Hunter." Garland eyed me carefully then groaned. "There is no need. I know where they all are."

I sat up straight and glared at Arthur. "If you know where they are. Why haven't you told the police?"

Garland took off his glasses and while shaking his head in frustration, began cleaning the lenses with a white handkerchief pulled from his pant pocket.

"Because they won't believe me, and if they do, they won't be able to do much about it... and well... I suppose, the less people who know about it, the safer they are apt to be. Mr. Hunter, I live in England, and decided to come to Australia when I learned the house had sold. As I have told you earlier. I have done extensive investigations into family history and the evidence is there on the coffee table. I had it sent from Glastonbury shortly after I arrived at this house. Because on my arrival here two weeks ago, I saw something I did not expect, nor could have imagined. Therefore, I felt it was my duty to call on you... The buyer, and thankfully, a detective."

"I had to tell you this story in person. Because I want you to understand the personal cost of continuing with your purchase. In other words, what I'm asking is... that you reconsider your decision, because I wish to burn the house to the ground."

I was about to say something when Arthur interrupted.

"Before you say anything Alex—and thank you for your patience—I know you have many questions. And I hope at the conclusion, you too, will agree with me. We must destroy the house and everything in it. I consider myself an honorable man and a contract is a contract. However, I wasn't familiar with the facts nor the contents of this house... Had I known, I would have done otherwise. I would never have put it on the market and thus we would not be having this conversation. Nevertheless, the final decision is yours." He shifted in his wheelchair and continued the oration. "Now, would you please remove the painter's sheet from the wall."

I stood, walked over to the left border of the wall. Taking hold of the sheet. I gave it an almighty tug and the whole affair dropped to the floor in a cloud of dust. While trying to avoid the swirling mountain of powder, I stepped back and groaned a little sheepishly.

"Sorry about that Mr. Garland. I didn't realize there was going to be so much powder." Garland didn't say anything but instead took the handkerchief and held it over his mouth. We both stared at the wall.

A large mural, clear and fresh as if the artist just finished it, filled more than three quarters of the wall from ceiling to floor. The painting was simple and appeared done in three or four colors. Sienna brown, black, yellow and red. But I'm no artist. In the forefront of the painting was a square table. A single, plain timber chair, pushed up close. On the tabletop was a deck of cards. Three cards taken from the deck lay isolated and arranged in a semicircle. Face-up, fronting the viewer were the jack of spades, the ace of spades and the joker. On the far wall, deep in the mural was a large red door, painted slightly ajar. Lining the two opposing walls of the frame were shelves. Placed side by side on those shelves were dozens of small square birdcages. Their frames appeared painted in shiny gold. All of them were empty and none displayed a visible door... that was about it. There were no people and nothing else.

"Vincent said he found a red door painted in the basement of this house?"

"That's right," replied Garland.

"Is it like this one?" I asked, thumbing at the painting.

"I haven't seen the one in the basement, but I'm assuming it is."

Although the painting appeared ordinary. I couldn't help feeling there was something wrong with it. As I moved closer I could have sworn I heard someone shouting. However, it was so faint and distant I instantly assumed the sound had come from somewhere outside the house. I turned to Garland and asked the obvious question. "Did Harrison paint this?"

He nodded. "I'm supposing he did before Victor locked him in the basement. But I cannot be sure."

"But if Harrison died in the basement after Victor disappeared, he couldn't have done it after. How could he have escaped the dungeon?"

"We never concluded that Harrison died in the basement. Therefore, take another look at the painting. A closer look." He whispered. Then, as if he'd just had an epiphany, he said. "You may want to view the rest of the photos before you get lost in the mural."

I walked over to the coffee table and picked up the stack of black-and-white photos. They were just faces of people. Most were women and men and single portraits of the Garland clan.

"Is this Vincent?" I asked, as I held up a photo of a man standing above a dead deer with a knife in his hand.

"That's him." Garland replied.

Shuffling through the large stack of photos drawing closer to the end, the photos changed to color and the clothing more this century.

"Who are all these people? They can't all be family members?"

"No, they are not," Arthur replied dryly. "There is a picture of my father, who disappeared while out riding his horse. The others, at least those I have connected to this case, are all people that have disappeared. Including two murdered girls found in a field just outside of Hexham."

"But that's impossible."

"What's impossible Alex... is that painting!" Garland exclaimed, pointing a shaky finger in its direction. "Let me continue. I beg a little more patience, because I can assure you, at the end of this mystery, details will become clear."

Arthur started. "When told by my lawyers the house at Crystal Creek had sold. I boarded a plane and flew straight out here. I reasoned I would settle the sale in person and gather any family possessions and remove them from the house before the buyer took ownership. When Boris and I arrived at the house, we didn't know anything about the painting. When we first saw it, we didn't give it much attention. Boris and I decided to stay in a motel in town until we organized sleeping quarters here. That first night Boris and I stayed in this house, we discovered the truth about the painting. And where Harrison may or may not be."

"Is Boris connected to you and your family?" I asked, wanting to confirm my earlier impressions.

"Yes, Boris is my adopted son. My wife and I found him in an orphanage in Russia when he was three years old. She is now dead... cancer. We took him home and over the years educated him. Not only has Boris three PhDs, but he is also a master of defense. He has many black belts in various Eastern practices."

*So, I was right. I thought. He is not just a driver.*

"After my wife died. Boris took on the role of my guardian and he takes my safety personally. He has all the information about the family history... in other words, he knows as much as I do."

"I gathered he was more than just a driver when I first saw him," I replied, and Garland simply nodded.

"Returning to the subject of the painting." I asked Arthur. "What is it about that painting that implies you know where Harrison may be now? I don't see anything except that he may have painted it at some point."

"Alex, the painting isn't exactly what it appears."

"And what does that mean?"

Garland looked at me strangely. "I believe the painting is haunted. There are people in that painting and they are still alive, although at present you cannot see them. More appear regularly."

"That's ridiculous." I blurted without thinking and as soon as the words left my lips, I regretted it. "I'm sorry Mr. Garland, but if you expect me to believe that real people are trapped in a painting, and the painting keeps adding them over time, I'll need a little more convincing."

Garland was now staring at the painting with his mouth agape. His skin had taken on a pale hue and I needed to follow his eyes.

"Alex, there is something going on in that mural and I have a feeling something terrible is going to happen. Mr. Hunter, if we don't resolve this and I end up in that painting, you must promise me you will burn this house to the ground. I have arranged with my lawyers. Should anything happen to me. You are to receive more than enough funds to recover the costs you have already incurred and some extra, to see you comfortably into retirement. On the condition that you never speak about or make public what I have told you and what we will discover here tonight. I cannot risk the integrity of other family members to suffer the results of publicity. Do we have an agreement?"

I couldn't take my eyes off Arthur while disputing his mental state. *The old man must be crazy*, I thought.

"Mr. Hunter." He repeated urgently. "Do we have an agreement?"

"Yes... yes... of course Mr. Garland. We have an agreement."



“Very good Alex. I’ll have you sign the documents as soon as Boris returns with the car.”

Garland looked at his watch. “It’s getting late and I’d like to be out of here before it gets dark. I have booked two rooms at the Railway Motel in Hexham. And if you don’t have any pressing engagements for tomorrow. It would please me if you stayed at the motel tonight so we can discuss, over dinner, what I believe we have now proved is a case of the supernatural.”

I was starting to feel like I had just stepped into something idiotic. And the story this old man was vomiting had that ring of major mental psychosis. However, Arthur interrupted my thoughts. “It is important you read Victor’s letter before we talk further.” The sound of an engine cutting signaled a car had arrived in front of house. Garland looked over his shoulder. “I believe Boris has arrived. Shall we go, Mr. Hunter?”

“First, I would like to see the basement, Mr. Garland.”

“I think it’s time you started calling me Arthur.”

“Right... Arthur... The basement?”

“Follow me.” Arthur, turned his wheelchair around and headed for the open doors. I tailed the squeaking wheelchair into the dining room. He pointed to the far-left corner where the empty tallboy stood uncovered in the corner on a mat. “Move the tallboy, and under the mat, you will find a trapdoor. When you lift it... you will see another timber floor. Push hard with the palm of your hand and it will spring open. Don’t be long Alex... I will see you at the car.” He stopped short and spun his wheelchair around. “Oh, and by the way... would you mind covering the mural before you leave. I fear it may not be wise to leave it exposed.”

“Sure, Mr. Garland, I mean Arthur. I’ll only be a minute.”

As Garland made his own way out of the house. I instead, went back into the lounge room and covered the painting. Then returned to the dining room. Shoving the tallboy away from the wall with little effort. It was empty and light. I lifted the old dusty and moth-eaten floor mat. Underneath was an iron hook. Taking hold, I pulled hard and the trapdoor opened. Resting the edge on the adjoining wall, I saw the second timber floating floor. With the flat of my hand I pushed hard. It clicked and swung inward.

Before me was a stone stairway that led into the dark. I took the small torch out of my pocket: standard detective carry-on luggage, as was my service revolver semiautomatic but left it holstered. I started down the stairs. Eight steps down and I found myself standing on a stone floor. Moving the torch around the dark basement proved there wasn't much to see. Some old dusty shelving. Cans of paint and paintbrushes in a tub. A small cot with no cover. A small round table with two chairs. Some broken rotting cupboards and the smell of damp and mold. Thankfully, no half-eaten egg sandwich.

I moved deeper into the basement. Then my light captured the painted red door on the far wall. It was as Garland described it—life-size and almost identical to the one in the mural upstairs. I moved a little closer and reached out, touching the red paint. My fingers skirted the outline for a moment. Bringing the torch-light a little closer, I studied the painting. It did look like Harrison had painted it yesterday, and although the rest of the basement was dusty, when I pulled my fingers away from the red door, they came up clean. I rubbed my fingers together—no dust.

Then instinct demanded... *I better get moving*. I had seen what I wanted to see for the moment and decided I would return later for a more in-depth look around.

Retracing my steps back up the stairs to the trapdoor, I had an unexplained feeling of dread. I was only halfway up when I could have sworn I heard an evil snigger filter from the dark below me. The hollow echo festered so close to the back of my neck that it made my skin crawl. Halting on the stairway, my body vaulted with alarm. I froze, unable to turn around. I heard it again. A snide cackle that had an unholy otherworldly echo. And this time it was a little closer.

I could have sworn a cold gust of putrid breath shuffled the hairs at the back of my head.

Spinning around I saw nothing, although my senses screamed, *there is someone down here*. I goose-fleshed all over and a cold, foreboding chill rippled through my body like the ghost of frozen fingers. My heart started doing double time. It was now slamming in my chest so fast I felt dizzy. My hands began to shake violently and I nearly dropped the torch.

In-an-effort-to calm myself, a ridiculous thought crossed my mind. *It isn't fatty food that is going to give me a heart attack. It's shitting myself in a dark and creepy basement.*

In all those years as a police officer I had suffered occasions of fear, but nothing like this moment. This was fear mixed like a dry martini—terror shaken and stirred with evil. I rushed up the remaining stairs without looking back and when I set foot back into the house, I slammed the trapdoor down behind me. Forgetting about the mat, I shoved the tallboy back into its original place.

My heart was pumping so much blood into my brain that I had to bend over, holding one hand to my chest to settle my breath. For a moment, I thought I was going to pass out. Finally, my breathing settled. Standing in the light of day. I turned, glaring sheepishly at the trapdoor with some relief. My next thought was... *Garland has spooked you with his stories. Pull yourself together, man.*

I didn't believe in ghosts. But I heard that evil snigger and felt its wicked intents. This time it wasn't my imagination.

From that moment on, it didn't matter what Garland was going to say next, or what the mysterious letter was going to reveal once we got back to the motel. I was going to get to the bottom of this mystery no matter what. *There is always a logical explanation... Always...*

I recovered my senses and left the house. Once outside in the sunshine. I was already questioning whether I had imagined the whole event.

Garland, seated in the backseat of the blue Ford was looking at something in his lap. Boris, leaning on the driver's door, stood waiting. I stepped off the porch and made my way to the car.

Arthur looked at me and his first words were. "You look a little pale Alex, did something happen?"

I wasn't going to answer the question and instead said. "Mr. Garland, I'll leave my car here and ride with you into town. I think we do have a lot more to talk about."

Garland smiled when he replied. "Get in."

Boris climbed into the driver's seat and before long we were pulling out of the driveway. I looked at my watch; it was three-forty-five. *How long would it take this time?*

Garland noticed. "Time doesn't read here the way it does out there."

I didn't know what he was talking about, but then again ... Maybe, I did. However, I decided not to answer or question his comment.

When we arrived at the Railway Motel, it was four-fifteen. Thirty minutes had expired. *How on earth had we lost thirty minutes?* On the map the house was like a twenty-minute walk from town and a five-minute drive. *Where the hell did the time go?*

I didn't have to say anything because Arthur explained. "Hoodie Black can manipulate time Alex. Time expires, but you don't get any older. It doesn't go back, just forward. In other words, even though it appears that time moves forward, it doesn't. How he does it is beyond me, and why it happens is a mystery. I'm hoping the discovery of this puzzle will be part of our combined efforts to uncover."

While Boris was removing the wheelchair from the car boot. Garland placed his gnarled fingers on my arm. "I'm sorry, my man, but you have now become part of this mysterious story, and I am afraid you are now at risk of becoming a missing person. If we cannot stop Hoodie Black and discover what connection he and Harrison hold, and where Harrison is now. We are all in grave danger."

I nodded, agreeing, yet still a little confused. What could I say under the circumstances? I had creepy evil sniggers still ringing in my ears. A mysterious mural. Harrison, a missing man, that may not be missing. And some malignant hooded figure that appears and disappears from photographs and is somehow able to manipulate time. Frankly, at this point, nothing was making any sense.

Boris, after helping Garland into his wheelchair went into the motel's office and a short time later exited with two keys. He offered me one and gave Garland the other.

“Make yourself comfortable Alex. I will see you in the motel restaurant at five thirty.”

I watched the two men make their way to their room, and didn't move until I saw the door close behind them.

My room was next to Garland's. However, instead of following the other men. I decided to go for a walk in the nearby park. I needed to clear my head and integrate all the information gathered from our meeting.

#### 4

Conveniently placed next to the Railway Motel was a small, neatly manicured park. Green grass looked like carpet, and scattered about were old elm trees. Their canopies formed perfectly round shaded spots where the owners of the motel had placed pleasing garden seats. It was a clear day with no wind and a blue sky. I decided to sit down in the shade offered by nature and go over the details of this strange and supernatural case.

Immediately, I regretted not bringing my laptop, and I also lamented not spending a little more time earlier this morning searching for information. All I had to go on right now, were two old newspaper articles and the word of an old, insane and crippled man. Nevertheless, regardless of my experience as a detective. Nothing like this case had ever crossed my desk. And adding to these facts... I had bought a house on the lake based on the word of a stranger. A stranger with green eyes whose name I could not remember, and right now, appeared to be haunting me.

I had a thousand questions rolling through my head so I removed the small notepad from my top pocket and began reading my notes. Time, it seemed, was accelerating with amazing speed.

Taking the photos out of the manila folder, again, I began to study them. On the back of each photo was the person's name, date of birth, when they disappeared and a short description about the case. I looked closely at the two pictures of Victor and Vincent holding the photos side by side. The likeness of the two brothers was uncanny. The photos were black and white and taken when they had been

younger men. I memorize their faces and then continued to look through the rest of the stack familiarizing myself with their profiles.

Arthur said he'd only been in Australia for the last two weeks. So, when did he start collating this information? I put the pictures down and wrote the question in my notepad with the intent to ask Arthur about his research. Then decided to read the photocopy of the letter Vincent sent to his wife in England before he disappeared.

There wasn't much in the letter except Vincent's plot to sell the house, followed by the date of his plan to return home. A small endnote spoke about the lack of Harrison's bones and the horrible egg sandwich.

When finishing my notes, it was close to five thirty. Time to get moving. I made my way to the restaurant.

Inside the restaurant I found Arthur in his wheelchair sitting close to a table, a little to the left of the entrance door. He was quietly reading the menu. I couldn't see Boris and wondered where he might be. Arthur, considering his choices smiled when I sat down, but didn't lift his gaze.

"The barramundi and salad look enticing." Arthur placed the menu on the table.

"Sounds like what I want," I replied without even glancing at the menu in front of me.

He grinned. "Very good... let's order."

The restaurant was empty except for a young couple sitting some distance from our table. When the waitress appeared, she scribbled our order and then asked if we wanted any drinks.

I settled for a beer and Arthur a bottle of white wine. Not the house special mind you, but the most expensive bottle on the list. His English class status showing like a beacon.

While we waited for our dinner. Garland reached inside his coat pocket and revealed a letter still in its envelope. He pushed it across the table. "This is the letter Vincent received from Victor many years ago."

I took the envelope and the first item I noticed was the sender's name and address. Snide & Lipshot, Attorneys-at-Law. A spasm of

sadness swept through my body and I had to force myself not to shake. This didn't go unnoticed by Arthur.

"You know the firm?" He asked quietly.

"A long story and a long time ago." I replied with a little more than deserved acuity.

Arthur didn't inquire further. I took his silence as a sign of respect and while unfolding the letter, the server returned to the table with my beer and Arthur's wine.

She opened the bottle and started pouring him a glass. I took the beer, squeezed off the top and had a long swig from the bottleneck, not bothering with the glass routine.

I was trying to swallow more than the beer, and again, Arthur noticed. Staring at me intently, he said to the waitress. "I think you better bring my friend another beer."

I replaced the half-empty bottle on the table and looked at Arthur, faking a smile.

Arthur patiently sipped his wine while he watched me as I began reading Victor's letter. Heading the page was Victor's name and address. Below it began:

*Dear Vincent,*

*I humbly wish to apologize to you for past grievances. Vincent, you were right from the beginning. I start this letter with a heavy heart and a fear beyond description. Hoodie Black has followed Harrison to Australia, and now I must admit. You were right... Eva Bradshaw's disappearance in Glastonbury leads to Harrison. I know it now... but at the time, and even though you insisted. I did not want to believe it. I am a father and love my son. However, evidence has recently emerged about Harrison's involvement in this sordid affair. His participation is now obvious.*

*A woman has disappeared from Hexham. I have no doubts Harrison has something to do with it.*

*What I am about to tell you brother, is beyond belief. And if something happens to me... if I am found missing. I have directed the lawyers to send this letter to you. Vincent, you must understand, and I know your thoughts and intents regarding Harrison, but I cannot let*

*him fall into the hands of the authorities. I am your brother and I must resolve to trust you and know you will do what is necessary should the circumstances need such action. You were always stronger than I.*

*Our voyage to Australia went without incident. I kept Harrison fairly trapped in the ship's cabin. Once on land in Australia, I bought a property outside Hexham, eighty miles from the city of Sydney. I built a house on the adjoining lake. I named it Crystal Creek and Harrison and I have lived an uneventful life for the past five years. Harrison still paints and I still burn them.*

*However, about a month ago, I saw him again, Harrison's terrifying friend Hoodie Black. He appeared behind a tree partly hidden in the back of house. Yes, I did see him, brother. To my very horror, Hoodie Black has followed Harrison to Australia.*

*I saw him again on two other occasions, and the third time I saw him, he was conversing with Harrison in the garden behind the house. I watched them from the window of my study. Harrison was nodding and Hoodie Black was speaking. Later, I saw Hoodie Black giving something to Harrison. It was a terrifying scene. With haste, taking my shotgun from the wall, I loaded it. Then ran from the house in-an-effort-to catch the beast and hopefully shoot it... But on my approach, the odious Hoodie Black simply disappeared in a cloud of black smoke.*

*Harrison, after being so disturbed by my appearance with the gun, growled in a most horrendous fashion and raised his fist at me, indicative of a threat to do me harm. I recoiled in horror.*

*Vincent, I am now afraid of my own son. That same night, Harrison disappeared from the house and I was frantic to find him. I passed most of the night wandering the lake and the bush in search of him. He had never wandered so far from the house since our arrival. When I could not find him, I returned to the house and waited. Then, at three in the morning, Harrison returned home and when he entered the house, passing me without acknowledgment, I noticed he had stains on his shirtsleeves. It was fresh blood Vincent... and Harrison had a look on his face that would scare the angels from their wings.*

*The next day, I locked Harrison in the cellar and went into town as I normally do to get food supplies, and what I heard at the market,*



*fairly froze my blood. A girl named Judy Brown had disappeared that very night and no one knew where she was.*

*After the young woman disappeared, the police visited my home with all manner of questions. I told them nothing of Harrison hidden in the cellar. The police are unaware that Harrison even exists.*

*I now know he is responsible—as, I believe, was his involvement with Eva.*

*I don't want another witch-hunt, and without any further doubt, I know Hoodie Black is the culprit and instigator of these horrors.*

*Last night after having dinner with Harrison, as we do each evening, he set about painting a mural on the lounge wall. I did not discourage him, for I know he is at peace when he paints. But this painting is unlike any other.*

*My brother, the painting is an abomination and fraught with the supernatural. I know you will not believe the tale I am about to tell, but I assure you, Vincent, the events are true; as true as I am your blood brother.*

*The painting depicts a red door in the background. In the foreground, there is a small rectangular table, and sitting at the table is a depiction of Hoodie Black.*

I looked at Arthur. "There was no depiction of Hoodie Black in the mural."

"Yes, I know. But it doesn't mean he isn't there or wasn't there at the time Victor saw it."

"Is it something like the photograph? Hoodie appears and disappears?"

"Yes, that's right, just because we cannot always see him, it doesn't mean he isn't there."

I looked around the room almost expecting to see the hooded figure. It was pure instinct that forced the action. Arthur did the same.

Trying to shade feelings of someone watching, I continued to read the letter.

*There are golden cages that line both opposing walls, and inside two of these cages are the ghostly forms of Eva Bradshaw, the young woman recently gone from Hexham, and there are others.*

*Many others. It is them, brother. I cannot forget their spectral faces. I know Harrison is not altering the painting, because at night, when the moon is at its 180-degree cycle and shines through the west window, the mural comes to life.*

*Vincent, I can only tell you, the howls I hear coming from that painting while I lay in my bed would freeze the blood of any sane man. I am afraid to sleep lest the shadow of Hoodie Black steals me into the painting.*

*Last night, it happened, after I had visited Harrison in the basement. I returned to my study to read. After a short time, I heard a tapping, grating noise outside. I moved to the window to peer into the dark, searching for the source of the disturbance. When I could see nothing, I pressed my face close to the glass to get a sight of what might be making that all horrible sound, when suddenly Hoodie Black sprung up from below the window. His cold face and luminescent fiery eyes hard-pressed against the glass, and not an inch from my own. In fright and horror, I fell back and crashed into the writing desk, hitting the chair and injuring my arm. My heart was beating so rapidly that for a moment I couldn't breathe. As I looked back at the window, Hoodie Black stayed there viciously glaring at me, showing sharp pointed white teeth. Brother, I tell you, in all honesty, it is the first time I have seen the fiery eyes of the evil Hoodie Black. Threatening and terrifying are his red eyes, that they near sent me insane with panic. In that moment Vincent, I knew my days are numbered.*

*Vincent, I begin this letter again. A week has passed and Harrison has disappeared. How he escaped the basement I have yet to discover. But he has painted a life-size door on the wall. Like the red door that appears in the mural. I believe he has left the basement through the painted door. At this point, you may believe that I have lost my mind. But this is not the case. For I have concluded that when Harrison went missing all those years ago, he was with this supernatural Hoodie Black. And this creature has attached himself to my son like an infectious parasite. As I write this account, more women have appeared in the painting. The papers have reported the murder of two women in Hexham. Now I know what I must do. I must find a way to kill or*

*destroy Hoodie Black. And if I fail brother. You must burn this house to the ground, with or without Harrison still inside.*

*Vincent, again I continue this letter in what I believe is two weeks after beginning it. And now I feel I must be losing my mind. I cannot measure time. It is hastening. Moving quickly forward. I have been examining time for some days now but have been unable to keep an exact record. I look at my timepiece. At present, it shows midnight of 18 October 1859. But I cannot be sure my eyes speak the truth. Vincent, I pause here for a moment, for I have heard sounds outside the house. I go to investigate, and brother... if I do not return. I pray you ... do not come to Australia. Order the house burned to the ground and forget both Harrison and I for all the days of your life.*

*Sincerely,  
Victor Garland*

I put the letter down on the table and asked Arthur. "How did the lawyers get the letter after Victor disappeared?"

"Before Victor left the house to find the source of sounds mentioned at the end of the letter. He put the letter in an envelope and addressed it to our lawyers. Then he left a note telling the finder to send the letter should he disappear."

"Victor must have known he was not going to return that night." I said. "That's why he signed the letter. My question is... How did he know?"

Arthur shook his head when he replied. "We will never know. It was too long ago and there are so many gaps that need filling."

"Did the police, at the time, read the letter?"

"Of course they did Alex. However, the letter was so unbelievable they thought Victor was insane, reasoning he was a mentally disturbed man and hallucinating. They searched the house including the basement but found no evidence of Harrison. After considerable time. The police sent the letter to our lawyers in Sydney. Who, in turn, sent it to England. They were just following procedure. Afterward, the local police concentrated all their efforts on finding Harrison, convinced that if Harrison existed, Victor may have done something to him. However, I believe the police moved their attention to Victor.

Believing he was the number one suspect ... of the murders, of the two young girls, and disappearance of Judy Brown, the girl Victor spoke of when Harrison went missing that night. But records show the police never found Harrison nor any evidence that could link the girls to Victor."

"Do you believe Harrison is still alive after all these years?"

Arthur's reply was testy. "What do *you* think happened to Harrison?"

I knew it was a loaded question, and Arthur expected a reasonable answer. But I didn't have one, so I said. "I don't know Arthur. As an explanation, this story is way out there on crazy street."

"You saw the mural Alex? What do you think is going on?"

I couldn't answer in any logical way. Shrugging, I replied, "I don't know Arthur. But there is one item we have proved. Harrison did, in fact, paint the mural before Victor disappeared. I'll have to explore this story a little deeper."

Arthur looked absently at me. "Make your deductions quickly, because time is running out and we, including Boris, may be the next victims of Hoodie Black and Harrison's murderous painting. Alex, I do not want to end up in that painting."

"What do you mean end up in that painting Arthur?" I asked with some curiosity. "Are you saying Victor was not insane and what he says about the painting is true?"

Arthur smiled. "Tonight we will go back to the house. There is no point in trying to explain it right now. You will see it for yourself."

A moment later the waitress delivered the meals, and for the rest of the dinner, Arthur and I made small talk. However, when Arthur had finished half his bottle of wine. I asked him what else he'd found out about this Hoodie Black creature.

Arthur placed the wine glass on the table. "Alex, what I have managed to discover will make no sense, but it's all we have to go on."

"My investigations into this creature Hoodie Black. Who, I think was once Black Jack. At least the one I believe we are talking about in this case... is a bogeyman. History describes Black Jack as a figure that appeared in Lancashire in 1206. The only other record was an old entry in a ledger. Affirming, Jack's conviction. They found him guilty of eating human souls but there is no record of his incarceration

or execution. Records end with his conviction then nothing more. This event being before the witch-hunts that started in the late fourteenth century. So, the certainty of Jack eating souls is still questionable. Whether-or-not this is the same creature we are dealing with beggars' belief, and honestly, I think this apparition is instead an ancient demon sent to Earth to inflict horrors on human lives."

"The Black Jack figure, George describes in his diary, may have just been a simple man afflicted by a darker possession." Arthur paused and picked up his wine glass. "He may have been just another person plagued by Hoodie Black, the same way Harrison was or still is. Another possibility is that Hoodie disguised himself as Black Jack. Nevertheless, he is an ancient creature that takes on human form then controls his victims, and is one of the Shadow people." Arthur raised his glass and took a sip of wine.

"Shadow people? I have never heard of them." I said. "Who? Or what are they?"

"Shadow people are dark and vile creatures," continued Arthur, "appearing on Earth from a portal caused by a disrupted energy field. They arrive from a hostile and evil dimension that is neither the spirit world nor the physical one. It's a third element, not related to the other two. My examination shows that Shadow people attach themselves to children. However, not exclusively. They also infest people that experience excessive fear or have a negative life history. Research suggests these creatures show up at once during or after a traumatic event. They then fasten themselves to the victim like a parasite, driving them into further despair and paranoia. The creature, now attached to its chosen victim, haunts and harasses the prey until the person is completely under its control and the connection is very hard to break."

"I believe Harrison was targeted by Hoodie Black and it was *he* that abducted him for those eight unaccountable days. During that time, the vile creature attached itself and has never let him go. Furthermore, I believe Harrison is still alive and the time discrepancies have something to do with keeping him alive. Time is manipulated when Harrison is close."

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” I said in disbelief. “If Harrison is still alive that would make him over one hundred and seventy years old. Possibly older.”

“That’s right Alex, but I’m convinced he still lives, or at least, the physical part of him and I’ll prove it to you.”

“So what you’re telling me is you know where he is?”

“Yes and no. I’ve seen him, but I don’t know where he is right now.”

“Where did you last see him?” My mind was flipping between sanity and insanity, and I pressed the old man for an explanation, but he only responded with another mystery.

“I will answer that question tonight. Now I think it’s time we retired to our rooms. I’m a little tired and want to rest before we head back out to the house just before midnight. Boris will come and call on you at eleven thirty. And I suggest you get a little rest yourself. It’s going to be a long night.”

At which point I knew the conversation was officially over. Boris, appeared at the table as if by some magic wand. Then, without saying a word to either of us, pushed Arthur through the restaurant and out the door. Leaving me a little dumbfounded and alone at the table. I stayed seated for the next few moments considering our conversation.

I was tired when I entered my room. It had been a long day so I dumped my body on the bed completely clothed, and at once, fell asleep. A moment later, Boris was knocking at the door.

“Mr. Hunter. It’s time to go.”

“Just a minute.” I mumbled then added. “I’ll be right there.” I could feel sticky clothes clinging to my skin and my body was screaming for a shower, but there was no time. Personal comfort would have to wait. Picking up the torch I shoved it in my pocket. Then double checking I’d loaded the pistol. I walked out of the motel room and into the dark.



*A dark otherworld exists alongside ours. And the true meaning of our convictions lie in the rhythm of time. What we believe is time, may find its answer in our greatest fears.*

**HOODIE BLACK:**  
**Some doors should never be opened**  
by C.S. Caspar

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