

A compulsively readable thriller, a lovesick ghost's commitment to reawaken his untimely death. Using a map, photo and a note found hidden in a lock box. Rik and Ana head out to solve a crime from the past traveling through portals.

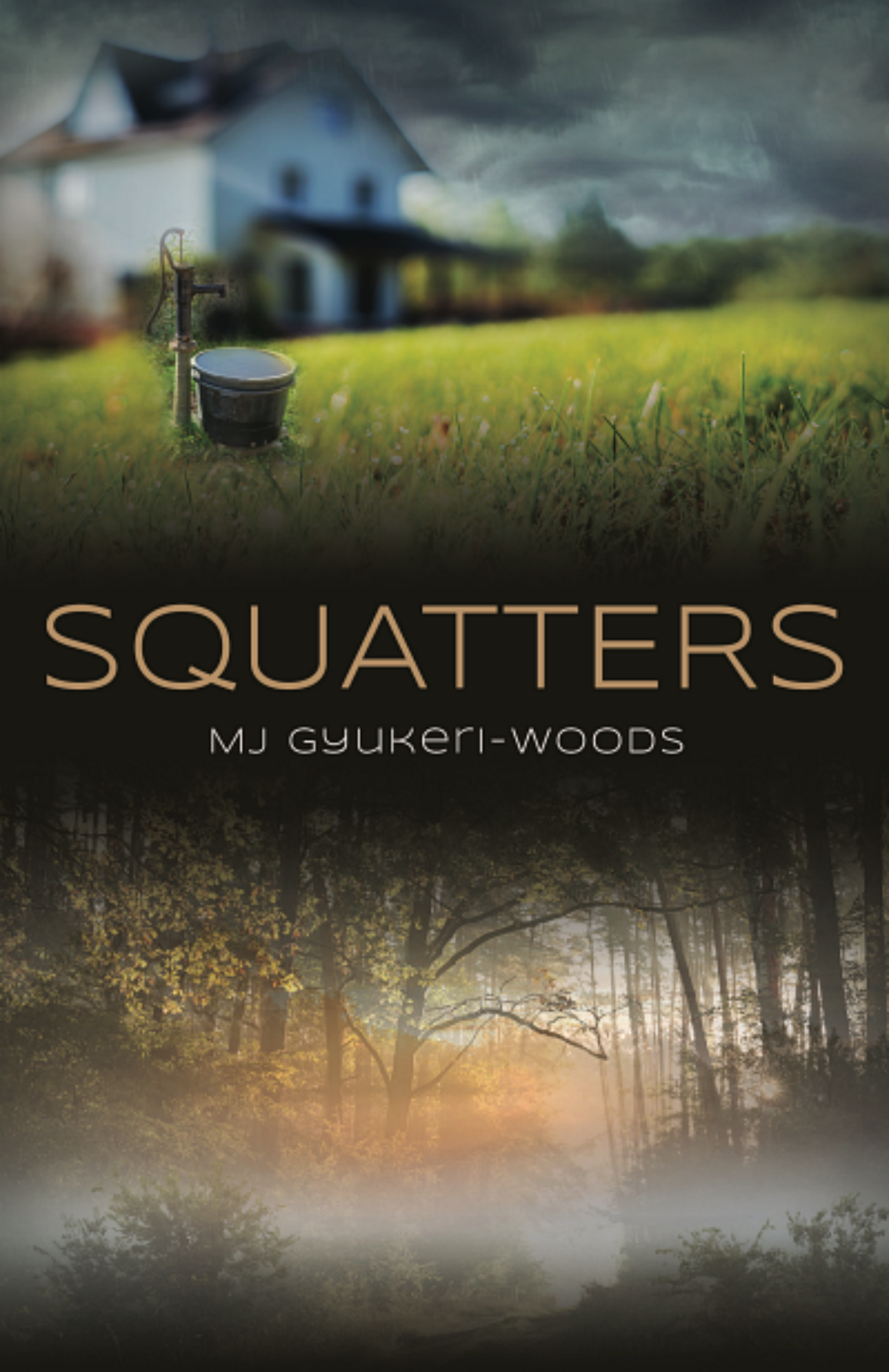
Squatters

By MJ Gyukeri-Woods

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SQUATTERS

MJ GYUKERI-WOODS

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Chapter One

Her claws clung to my thighs. Samantha, the massive black and white cat had leaped across the coffee table, landing squarely into my lap. Blood oozed through my jeans from the deep scratches. I jumped and splashed scalding hot coffee down the front of my shirt, while the rest spilled over Samantha's thick fur. Coffee droplets trickled off Samantha's fur rolling onto the floor.

"Ow! Damn cat! Get out of here." I shouted; I threw a balled-up wad of aluminum foil at her. Without warning, she bolted through the room, batting the shiny foil across the hardwood living room floor. Stopping short, her thick undercoat propelled her in a spin along the polished floor. She continued skidding into a pile of newspapers. Digging at the newspaper, her claws and teeth tore through the pages, shredding most of the paper.

"Sometimes I wish Mom took you with her when she moved out." I pushed the cat away from where she was playing. She jammed newspaper into a gap where the wall and floor came together. I squatted onto my knees and pushed a long, dark curl out of my eyes.

"How on earth did you do this?" I said. The corner where the boards came together was where I stood squinting. I crouched down again, giving the shredded newspaper a good hard tug. I noticed the floor in that corner, joined with short wooden panels. Some pieces popped free. They were wiggly like a loose tooth. I tried to jiggle them back into place. They were uneven; the wood grain didn't match up; these pieces of wood came from different trees and combined to be used as filler panels. This was something I learned last year in shop class.

Samantha reached her paw to where she left off chasing the ball of foil. I shoved her away. Several of the slats were loose. I tried to shimmy the loose pieces of flooring back into place but, the more I attempted to adjust the slats, the more of the boards continued to slip out. The hole in the corner grew as the pieces of flooring slipped away. Reaching into the hole, I felt something hard and cold against my fingertips. The gap between the loose boards was large enough to fit my entire hand. My entire arm slid deeper into the opening up to my elbow, and I could feel a padlock jiggling against my wrist. Stretching out my fingers, feeling a thick hinge, I reached further. I pulled the rest of the loose boards away and lifted a metal box from its hiding place.

I wiped away the dust and cobwebs from the rusty metal object. They painted it dark brown and had deep gouges dug into the sides. Along the top of the box, despite the paint being so chipped and faded, I could see there was an embossed word. I rubbed the top of the box with the corner of my shirt. Slowly letters revealed themselves.

G Y P, were the only letters I could make out, the rest too faded to read.

“Hum, I wonder what that’s supposed to mean?”

Brass rivets punched around the perimeter and along the top and bottom rim. It was approximately the size of a large shoe box. It had a stretched and cracked leather handle across the side and fastened into the box with bolts made of iron. Two rusty brass padlocks were dangling from the latch, with the keys still hanging from the keyholes. Encrusted in heavy corroded metal, I scrapped the metal and then tried the first key. It turned easily, and the lock popped open. Then I turned the second one. It wasn’t easy this time. The key was stuck. I couldn’t budge it in or out. I ran to the kitchen and found the WD40 under the sink. Spraying it all over the lock and key, I tried again. This time it

worked. The lock popped open. The hinge creaked with a mournful squeal as I lifted the lid.

“So, what do we have here?” I thought I saw dark green eyes looking back at me and I dropped the box as though it burned my fingertips. The entire contents spilled onto the floor.

My tall build, six feet and three inches, scavenged along the floor to examine the contents. My hair spilled onto my face. It had grown so long; I figured it’s time for a ponytail. I was pushing the hair out of my eyes and tucking it behind my ears when I a crash startled me from the kitchen. Samantha came running toward me. She had obviously just knocked something down and startled herself. Curious as always, she stretched her paw toward a shiny hairpin. With a quick swat, Samantha smacked the pin towards the hole. I grabbed a large piece of the wood flooring and blocked the pin to by covering the hole. She scrambled away and slid into the papers that were scattered on the floor. Dust bunnies swirled through the documents, and this sparked her curiosity more. She grabbed the papers with an outstretched claw and tore into them with her fangs.

“Get out of here!” I shouted and then moved her aside. I cautiously lifted the silver clipped hairpin and rubbed my finger over it.

“Hum, this is interesting. I wonder if it’s valuable?” I rolled the pin between my fingers and inspected it. It’s shaped like a rose and filled with emerald stones along the stem and bright, crimson rubies set into the petals.

I shook the envelopes and dumped the contents onto the floor. Then I searched the box, looking for a hidden pocket. I slid my fingers along a faded red silk liner and I groaned while gathering the papers. A skeleton key fell out of a crumpled paper as I was about to pack them away. I unfolded the paper and found a hand-drawn map. It

reminded me of when Ana and I were kids, we played pirates and drew our own map in search of buried treasure.

The map revealed a few prominent buildings: a Church, a meeting hall and a farmhouse. A cranberry bog surrounded them. Railroad tracks divided through cart ways and walking paths. They connected and crossed over roadways. Even a mileage scale drawn in the far-left lower corner of the map. It described gravel roads, dirt roads, railroads and with small slashes illustrating mileage.

I found an old photograph buried under the papers. It was curled up on the edges and faded in shades of black, white, and gray. I recognized something about the picture that made little sense to me. I put the picture aside, figuring I'd check it out again later, and shifted through the rest of the papers.

I crossed my legs under me and then I leaned back and stretched out my legs. The picture was in my hand. I wanted a closer look. A strange feeling came over me when I stood up. I thought I was only a little dizzy until beads of sweat formed on my forehead. Goose bumps were crawling up my arms, and they lingered on the back of my neck. I felt nauseous, and I thought I was about to vomit. I dropped the photo like a branding iron poked at me. Samantha ran in for the catch. She grabbed it with her teeth and ran under the sofa to play with it. I quickly recovered the photo and grabbed the picture before she could rip into it. I sat down and wiped my forehead on my shirtsleeve. Then I felt an odd sensation, like silk brushing the hairs along my right arm. I let out a gasp. My dark emerald eyes darted around the room, searching for the source. 'Hum that was definitely bizarre.' I thought.

I could barely make out anything in the picture. It looked to me like they took it in a thick fog. I could see a barn and a big swampy field. It blended the colors into milky white and gray, then washed out into the black setting.

Samantha slinked in behind me and rubbed her back up against me. I leaped to my feet, and I shrieked like a frenzied little girl.

“Samantha, you scared the crap out of me! Where did you come from?” I laughed nervously, picking up the cat and stroking her fur. She began prodding at something in the hole after I put her down. I pushed her aside and my eye caught a glitter coming from the opening in the floor. I reached in and pulled out a small piece of jewelry with a sharp pin attached. They shaped it like a butterfly with gold and green wings and little yellow gem stones along the entire rim of the pin.

I was packing away the papers back into the box when I saw something that looked like it could be a legal document. On closer look, it appeared to be a note. The penmanship was perfect, but the ink smeared, making it difficult to read. I read it out loud. My cell phone startled me, vibrating in my pocket. I looked at the text. It was Ana; ‘Hey what’s up’.

I tucked the phone back in my pocket and continued reading the letter.

*Thaddeus Cahoon, Pastor, First Baptist Meeting House
July 7, 1899*

Harwich, Massachusetts

Dear Sirs:

*This letter is regarding the cranberry bog and farm
house on 53 Bog Way in the northwest corner of Hollow
Rd. Harwich, Massachusetts.*

The above property is in the County of Barnstable and believed to be inhabited by unseen life-forces. The presence of apparitions is highly suspect. They have reported several people missing from the local area. They were last seen either working or visiting the cranberry bog. Enclosed is the deed to the land and the house, which sits on the south side of the lot.

Since the demise of Harold Wood and the disappearance of his wife Margaret, the Church has taken responsibility for this property.

I am here to represent the Church and we are no longer interested in being proprietor of this property. I suggest this property is to be kept vacant for eternity.

Sincerely,

Thaddeus Cahoon

Thaddeus Cahoon

My hand trembled as I looked over the letter and deed.

‘Holy Crap, this is random. I should find out more. Where did this box come from and how did it get here? I thought. Then I searched inside the floor opening yet again. I hoped to find something, anything else.

I reached for my cell phone and replied to Ana's text. Ana and I have been best friends since grade school. My fingers were still shaking, and I almost dropped the cell phone.

I texted Ana back. 'Get over here'.

Ana: 'I was on my way. What's going on?'

Rik: 'I'll show you when you get here. It's too difficult to explain.'

Ana: 'Alright, I'll be there in about five.'

Ana let herself in and bounded into the living room. "What's going on? You sounded anxious, hey! What do you have there?"

"Come over here, check this out. This is amazing! I found this box buried away in a

hole under the floorboards."

Ana slid onto her knees, swinging her golden ponytail from side to side; She carefully looked over the metal box and papers spread out on the floor. Then she spotted the hole in the floor.

"Cool. Were there any treasures?"

"No, I found nothing valuable, but I found these papers. Look."

Ana quickly scanned the papers and looked up at me. Her bright hazel eyes took on a silverish green shade reflecting from the sweater she was wearing. The cheerful expression she always wore faded and her eyes became clouded over as she stare back at me. She seemed to go into a trancelike state. She appeared to be looking through me as though she saw a ghost. Her facial muscles were twitching like she was having a seizure and it turned her lips up into a near smile.

I reached over to Ana and grabbed her shoulders, and I started shaking her.

“Hello Ana, talk to me. What’s happening?”

Ana shook her head, rubbed her eyes, and smiled back at me. Her eyes returned to bright hazel, and she spoke in a precise tone while a lingering chill ran up her spine.

“I don’t know what that was all about, but it was definitely weird. Don’t go thinking I’m psycho, OK. But a woman was standing behind you. It was like she was there, but she wasn’t. I don’t know, but anyway.” Ana shook her head and wiped her eyes, trying to understand what she either saw or didn’t see. Ana’s voice shook as she described to me what it was she thought she saw.

I slid next to her and held her close.

“I got a good look. She wasn’t very tall, medium height maybe 5’6”, with long reddish-brown hair with dark green eyes. Probably in her early twenties; she was wearing a long velvety, emerald green dress with a sash that tied in front. It had a low neckline, and she wore a strand of bright white pearls around her neck and she had a butterfly pin pinned to her dress. She was smiling at me and gesturing to the papers.”

“Did she say anything? You were smiling at me when you came around.”

“She said nothing, but I got a warm, cozy feeling, kind of like when I was a little girl sitting by a fire sipping hot chocolate. That’s about the best way I can describe it, anyway.” Ana replied.

I leaned over and hugged Ana.

“I don’t think you’re psycho. Something is weird about this whole thing. Do you recognize this pin? Is this the one she was wearing?” I said, holding out the butterfly pin in my hand.

“Damn! Yes, that’s same one. Holy Crap! This is for real!”

Ana picked up the papers and examined them.

“I really think that woman I saw wants us to check this out.” Ana said.

“I think you’re right. Let’s Google it and see if anything shows up,” I suggested.

My heart was racing as I typed the address into the search engine. I scrolled down and there it was. Listed in the ‘Cape Cod Gazette’ in October 2002.

He clicked on the link.

‘Haunting, neighbors claim to have seen ghosts wandering in and around the bog at the Punk Horn conservation area in Harwich, Ma. Also, unexplained shrieking during harvest season could hear coming from the old farmhouse.’

“So, what do you think?” I asked.

“What I think is we need to go on a road trip now!” Ana replied as she reached for her jacket.

I gathered the contents of the box, stuck the map in my pocket and shoved the box under my bed, I cramped it in there amongst the clothes stuffed under my bed.

“I don’t think anyone will bother looking under there.” I chuckled.

I plugged the address into my cell phone GPS and watched as the little screen zoomed into the edge of the Atlantic Ocean towards a cranberry bog approximately three miles inland from the shore.

“It should take us just over an hour to get there.”

We grabbed a few snacks and water for the road trip and climbed into my old Chevy pickup.

“We’ll have to make a quick pit stop. We need gas and some more snacks too! If we get going soon, we’ll be there by early afternoon and we’ll have plenty of time before it gets dark.” I said, grabbing my old backpack.

“More snacks. It’s only an hour’s drive. We can just grab some lunch when we get there. You’ll survive!” Ana laughed at me and patted my stomach.

The traffic going through Boston in our late morning drive was going smoothly. After about an hour, we crossed the Sagamore Bridge.

“Wow, check out that water. The tide is so high the water level is almost up to the road. There’s supposed a full moon tonight. Who knows what to expect then.”? I announced.

I got off the highway and we traveled the back roads. The drive was perfect. The weather couldn’t have been better. We drove along the shore with the windows down and feeling the warm Indian Summer’s breeze fill the truck’s cab.

“How is it you knew to get off this exit” Ana asked. “Do you know where you’re going?”

“Sure, I do. I remember being here as a kid. We came here a lot. This was the route we always took. I haven’t been here in a long time, though; At least eight years, anyway.”

“Well, that’s curious. I wonder if when we get to the haunted property, if you’ll remember, if you’ve been there before,” Ana considered.

“Hum, good question, I hadn’t actually thought about that one.”

The drive took them along with a fantastic blend of seashore and woodlands. The greenish blue ocean slapped the shore, causing little

pebbles to scale the sand. White caps topped off the waves as the air current rippled across the ocean. We breathed in the salty sea air, fond memories visiting the cape beaches filled my thoughts as I watched the stretch of shoreline extend its reach into the horizon.

It mesmerized us along our journey. Turning inland towards the pine grove, the long, lean tree trunks reached upwards with their branches cresting like a crown.

The aroma produced by the pine trees gave such a nostalgic feeling. The smell brought me back to family outings at Long Pond.

“This is amazing I can even smell hot dogs and hamburgers cooking in charcoal fire pits.” I said.

Ana leaned over and kissed me.

“What was that for?”

“Oh nothing, only you’re just so sweet and sensitive!” Ana said with a grin.

“Just don’t let that get around, I’m already know as Rik the freak, soon they’ll be teasing me and calling me Rik the sweet freak!” I reached over and tousled Ana’s ponytail and returned the kiss.

Slowly rounding the corners, sand folded itself along the edge of the road while crunching under the tires of the truck. I had to slow down as the road narrowed to barely two lanes. The roadway changed from an oiled asphalt to packed dirt.

A large flock of over grown wild turkeys greeted us as while we pulling in. There must have been about twenty-five of them. Ana jumped in her seat, not sure who was more startled. The turkeys or me. The turkeys scampered off into the woods, running in single file from the tallest to the smallest, each one squawking at the one ahead.

“We must have interrupted lunch,” I said, while laughing at Ana.

We pulled into a parking area near a line of yellow ropes. There was a laminated sign hanging in the middle of the bright rope. ‘No Trespassing!’ spelled out in large red letters. I parked a bit too close to the rope. I could feel the truck tires sink into the wet, sandy soil.

I ignored the fact that the front end of my truck was leaning to the starboard side and pitching forward. I swung open the truck door and leaped out like an excited ten-year-old.

“Let’s get going. Before it gets dark, I want to see as much of it as possible. I kept that map from the box. I hope it’s at least slightly accurate. Someone drew it a long time ago. I’m sure the walking and cart paths will probably be the same.”

“I wish we did more preparation, and we had more than a hand-drawn map to go by,” Ana replied. “What about the truck? Are we just going to leave it like this?”

“Seems to me you were just as anxious as I was to go on a road trip. Are you having second thoughts about this?”

“Ah, yeah, I have to admit, I’m not having a good feeling about this place,” Ana replied. “I understand you have a lot of fond memories, but it’s creepy! We’re in the middle of nowhere, no houses in sight and all the roads are just deep, mud filled ruts. Not to mention your truck is being sucked into the earth.”

“All right, I agree it’s kind of sketchy.” As I lifted my head, I felt like a dog. “Not sure what that nasty smell is. I think it’s coming from the bog, but... we drove all the way here; we might as well go for a short walk along the bog trail. Nothing will happen in broad daylight. We will stay together, OK?”

“OK, but if anything is strange here, even a strange feeling, we’re out of here agreed”

Ana stated.

“Yes, agreed.” I replied and gave Ana a quick hug.

We headed out a few hundred feet when I remembered

“Oh! I just thought of something! There’s a flashlight in the glove box. I’m going to go back and get it. Wait here. I’ll be right back.” I said without turning back.

“Oh, no you don’t. We are supposed to stay together! Remember?” Ana shouted back to me as she watched me run. Ana plopped down on a smooth, moss covered rock and kicked at the sand. She daydreamed of finding a gem, at least long enough to distract her from thoughts of waiting for me in this supposed haunted cranberry bog. Her feet swirled through the sand and then she saw something glittering. She reached down to see what was there. Moving aside the sand, she dug out a faded gold wedding band.

“Hum! This is odd. I wonder where this came from.” The band crushed and bent almost flat; the gold soft enough that she could straighten it out. She wiped it off with the corner of her jacket. “It looks like something engraved on the inside.” Ana said, speaking out loud to herself.

I hurried back to find Ana sitting on a rock, talking to a ring.

“Who are you talking to?”

“Look. I just found this; Something partially buried it. Check out the inside. I think it’s a number. It looks like it might say 1895. Do you think it might be a date? Here,” pointing along the inside rim, “this looks to me like initials might have engraving on the inside. This is old. I wonder how it got here?” Ana tucked the ring away into her pocket.

“You got me. Maybe it dropped, or a storm carried it here. Who knows? Let’s keep walking toward the bog.” I cupped my hands together like I was making an optical instrument and peered through my ‘binoculars’. I turned my head from side to side as marked, though I was searching for something in the distance.

“It would be nice if these trails were marked so we don’t get lost.”

Ana replied, “They wouldn’t have markings; this is private property, so hopefully we don’t get lost because no one would ever find us or even come looking.”

Just then, Ana heard in the far distance the slightest roar of thunder.

“Did you hear that?

“Did I hear what?”

“That rumble it sounds like thunder. Can’t you hear it?”

“Ah, no; look up, the sky is bright blue, not a cloud in sight. Let’s go watch out. There are a lot of deep ruts where the rain washed away parts of the trail.”

“I heard something and if it wasn’t thunder, what was it?” Asked Ana.

“I don’t know. I heard nothing. Maybe it was just the wind skimming over the bog.”

We walked together hand in hand for a short distance until the trail narrowed and only one person at a time could pass.

Ana startled at the sound of a bullfrog’s loud croak; it crossed the path heading for the stagnant water alongside the trail. I was following close behind Ana and caught her as she lost her footing and stumbled.

Ana regained her balance, then hurried ahead when she noticed a sign.

“Look there, down by where the trails cross. I see a sign. Let’s go see what it says.”

Ana read aloud; “Hmm, another ‘No Trespassing, Police take notice’ I really think they don’t want trespassers.”

I laughed as Ana stood with her hands on her hips, glaring at me.

“Do you really think anybody will see us out here? Who will report us? You are such a ‘by the rules’ chick. You’re sickening.”

Ana smirked at me, and she shrugged in agreement.

We’d been hiking for about a half of a mile when they reached a clearing. In the recent heavy rain, the bog flooded. We entered from one of the four trails that merged at the abandoned pump house.

The partial cement barrier surrounding the pump house was crumbling. Most of the pieces of the wall were disintegrating in tangles, wrapped in weeds. There was a rusted gate hanging from its hinges. A fence dangled from a single rusted bolt just below the gate; Something partly buried it in the ground beneath a pile of rotting leaves.

“I’m willing to bet harvesting of cranberries happened here in a long time.” I announced as lifting a rusty old water pump handle.

“Ah yeah! Do you think!” Laughed Ana.

We sat on the wall drinking from our water bottles and took in the beauty surrounding the bog. The canopy of orange and yellow spaghetti like weeds overgrowing along the shallow edge of the bog.

Filling in the entire bog with a honey glow, tall shoots of golden rod sprouted. The trees were losing their leaves, giving way to bare branches; in the distant, we could see a view of the old farmhouse through the trees high above the bog.

“Let’s hike over to the other side and check out that farmhouse!” I suggested.

Ana folded her arms across her chest and squinted toward the old farmhouse.

“I don’t feel very good about this. Even from this distance, I don’t like it.”

“What might happen there? It’s an old, dilapidated house with a barn in an even worse condition; which probably hasn’t worked for decade’s maybe even centuries? Aren’t you even the slightest bit curious?”

“Sure, I’m curious, just a little concerned, you can say. The idea this land is supposed to be haunted bothers me.” Ana glanced toward the old farmhouse. “It’s really beautiful here, but you know, just disturbing”.

“OK, I get what you’re saying.” I laughed, wrapping my arms around Ana, and snuggled in a kiss behind her neck. “Come on; think of it as an adventure! Who knows, maybe we’ll be famous? Just picture the headline ‘Teen couple discovers haunted, abandoned property, story to follow.’ So, let’s create the story.”

Ana laughed at my crazy animation, gesturing with my arms swinging wide over my head, then pointing toward the house, reminding her of the scarecrow on the ‘Wizard of Oz.’

“How could I resist such a goofball? Alright, I’m in,” Ana said in a vaguely agreeable tone.

We walked faster along the trail toward the farmhouse.

“If we keep following this trail all the way around the bog, it’s going to take us forever. Let’s cut through the woods. It’s more direct. We’ll get there in half the time, then we’ll have more time to spend checking things out before it gets dark.”

Ana nervously adjusted her ponytail and cleared her throat.

“Don’t get ahead of me, though. Remember what we said. We have to stay together.”

We found what looked like a small padded down path cutting through the thickets. It surrounded the old house, then we followed it straight toward the front porch. Our exposed skin scratched along the briars and tangled around our arms and legs. As we got closer, the smell of rotting, charred wood filled our nostrils. We stopped and examined the property from a short distance.

“This looks more like an old beach cottage that’s damaged from bonfires than a farmhouse,” I said. The faded white paint was blistered and peeling from the face of the house.

“This house almost looks like a sunburned face. See there” I pointed up toward the peak.

“That window in the barn looks like a giant eye watching our every move.”

“I hope you’re not trying to scare me, because you’re doing a damn good job of it.” Ana gasped as she watched a fence post slowly tilt to one side; She brought her hands to her face, wanting to cover her eyes but unable to stop watching. In a high pitch shrill, Ana screamed out.

“Rik, watch out, behind you!”

My eyes quickly scanned the area, looking for something to grab. From the scream, I assumed we need protection. Leaning toward a downed tree, I pulled a loose branch from the tree's grip. I spun around and began to aimlessly swinging at anything in sight.

"What is it, Ana? I see nothing. What are you screaming about?"

"Right there; the ground it is rolling and lifting, like something is coming towards us. See the big hump. It's coming this way." Ana pointed with tears blurring her vision.

"I'm sorry Ana; I don't see what you are talking about." The branch was swinging like a club. Lifting my weapon, I saw the lump swelling and grow twice its size. I hammered my 'club' at it. Doing this, I flattened out a lump of dirt.

"Rik, stop. You're making it worse. Come on, let's get out of here," Ana shouted.

From under the lump appeared a tiny black mole.

"Ha, there's your scary lump." I chuckled.

Ana pleaded, "Rik, you promised as soon as anything was weird out here, we'd get out! Remember, you promised."

"I know, I remember. That was just a little black mole, nothing weird about that!"

I lifted a rotting fence post blocking our path; a cluster of stones beneath the decomposing wood tremored. I slipped backwards, giving way to a long green snake with a brownish stripe. It was slithering from beneath the rubble. Ana lunged into my arms and then she let out a blood-curdling scream.

"What the hell was that for? You practically blew out my eardrum. It's just a harmless garter snake."

“Well, I don’t like snakes,” Ana snapped. Then she dug her hand into the muddy trail, grabbed a large stick and headed back toward the path.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m getting out of here even if I have to go alone. I’ll call my Mom, she’ll come get me.”

“Come on, I’m sorry, let’s just go take a quick look and then we’ll leave, OK.” I said with a puppy dog look in my eyes.

Ana smacked my shoulder and then she cried, “Oh.... All right, you know I hate it when you beg.”

I took her grubby hands and then gave her a comical grin. “How did your hands get so dirty?”. I pulled her into my arms and then reached her mucky fingers toward my face. She pursed my lips together, gently kissing me.

“Now that’s what I mean! So, what else can I get when I beg?”

“Forget it. Get me home first!”

“OK, remember you owe me.” I laughed.

“Right, I owe you! I think you got that backwards. Fill your promise first, then we can talk about begging.” Ana ran ahead, skipping over rusty nails and roof shingles scattered about the front yard.

Chapter Two:

Paladin

I sense autumn arrive once again. For the past one hundred and twenty years, I've watched the seasons come and go. I am aware of the crisp, bright blue sky with strands of wispy clouds. In the landscape beyond, it dotted the horizon in bright gold and crimson red. The sway of marsh weeds poking through and between the pines fills me with nostalgia for the previous life they gave me to enjoy.

The evil that consumed the men who destroyed my friends and family. Ever since that last day, when we tore from one another; It has isolated me from the woman whom I've never stopped loving. We never had the chance to begin our lives together. I must continue to be patient and wait. She will return and until that time, I alone will guide you beyond these gates.

Come and follow me to my resting place. You will meet several interesting people. Together we have been waiting for her return. It's still so difficult to believe. For just a few short days, Margaret touched all our lives with her love of life and her unfaltering gift to care for each one of my people.

My name is Paladin. On September 6, 1895, I was twenty years old. This is the day I first set eyes on Margaret. I saw her peering down from behind a cluster of boulders. Her attempt at hiding herself obviously didn't work. It looked as though she'd spent the night in the woods. Her clothes torn, and she was missing a shoe. There were cuts and scrapes on her arms and legs from walking through the briars. She didn't see me sneaking up behind her. She leaped so high she landed directly in my arms. I looked into her eyes and I was forever lost.

I promise you; I will explain more, but first I will take you along on our journey.

Chapter Three

I have concealed this desolate land beneath a thicket of briars and blanketed within layers of wet sandy marsh.

A cranberry bog crept out from beneath the soggy soil. Its vastness stretched across town lines, flourishing more with each passing season. They left this property to decay containing the souls of those who once worked this fertile ground.

A fair distance beyond the cranberry bog, a small farmhouse buried in a mass of spiny underbrush.

The cedar shingles on the north-east side of the house weathered from years of abuse. Moss edged along the outside window ledges with discarded spider webs and egg sacs caked deep into the crevices. Peeling auburn red paint and dark brown shutters held a lingering hue of color, casting this house long ago shown vibrant with autumn tones.

On first inspection, it appeared the house may have occupied; they left a stack of unread newspapers huddled against the front steps; on closer consideration, the newspapers shown years of decomposing, wet and encrusted with mold. Confirming, it had not occupied this house in a very long time.

A fine mist swirled upward from beneath the rocks and vines. It slithered through the powdery stones of the crumpling outside the hearth. The cast blossomed from murky white, then dusky gray, and finally transposing into a glowing sea foam green. The mist grew and thickened into a shape of what appeared to be a man. He stretched and rub his back against the jagged hearth as though he had an itch. While scratching, bits of green, showery mist sprayed from his figure.

He peered into a smoky, beveled glass window. The window provided a tiny peak through the wide oak front door. The rusty wrought iron hinges and a tarnished brass door knocker wore well through the years. He watched with hopeful eyes as he scanned the living area. A thick layer of dirt and dust covered the wide pine floors.

Old ripped sheets lazily covered the two arm chairs balanced on either side of the parlor. Heavy Victorian drapes full of dust and cobwebs dangled from the wooden rods and hung over the large front window.

He slid under the door and followed the spiral wooden stairs to the upstairs loft. An oak rail coated with a thick black mold hung from its corroded hinges. The blistered and splintered steps could never hold the weight of a man. He enjoyed being weightless as he tread his way to the upper level.

The shattered glass windows in the dormers overhead formed a quivering shadow as the sunlight reflected off the serrated edges. This delivered a bizarre pattern dancing against the wall.

He enjoyed this illusion; keeping intruders away from the home that once should have been his. He knew he frightened families out of this home. This was his home now and no one would ever force him to leave this property ever again. He sat on a child's discarded stool as he watched through the broken glass window toward the bog and waited.

A few yards away from the meager farmhouse were the remains of a barn. Battered shingles hung from the torn black tar paper allowing crater sized holes into the roof.

Thickets sprouted around the perimeter amongst the patches of gold wild flowers dotted with tiny black spots in the middle. A troth

still held in place by disintegrating cement blocks lining the outside walls. Filled with dead flies and June bugs. Remnants of cement flooring, littered with rodent waste and molding hay, revealed local field mice were now the current inhabitants.

A ladder passed into the loft through a hole in the rough wooden ceiling. It gained access to the corncrib.

The window with wagon wheel panes presented a deception of snooping. A rusty, oily film swirled through the glass pane, giving the appearance of a single blood-shot eye. It was the only window on the entire property that wasn't encrusted in moss.

Clouds of mosquitoes hovered over a swampy, stagnant brook completely framing the property. This generated a thick, droning sound. The tone reverberated in a mournful buzz, sounding like a mass of people speaking in an incomprehensible babble.

A faint breeze drifted across an adjacent pond, bringing with it an offensive, decaying odor. Crickets and boisterous toads sang out their mating calls in a rhythmic assembly. The atmosphere, now mixed with clammy dampness and rotting stench, created a favorable invitation for his annual gathering.

Gusts of wind stirred up the decomposing leaves, creating little whirlwinds of debris. The trees and shrubbery started bending in the breeze as branches snapped with the force of the increasing surge.

A heavy, thick mist lifted from the cranberry bog in long, finger-like patterns. The strands emerged as fog and then dissipated into the air. Instead of dissolving, the misty vapors drifted upward into and formed distinct milky veils.

The setting sun gave way to the early evening visitors. A new moon showing only a small sliver of light encouraged the guest's

arrival. The stars attempted to shine, but only a faint glitter could break through.

Fog settled down into the bog, blocking any attempt at light. Blackness filled the night sky.

A florescent glow spilled in amongst the armless trees, and a distinct brilliance of the visiting spirits illuminated the night sky.

Two figures manifesting in a green silky glow appeared first. One was large and the other slightly smaller, emerged unassuming as they blended into the setting. Other figures breezed in and joined the gathering. A chaos of movement filled the air. The sound of an orchestra as they tuned instruments just prior to the performance. This created an arrangement for the annual meeting of bog souls.

Howling screams unearthed from the long-ago. Large stones hurled through the air, sand and rotted cranberries rained down. Shrieks and loud, thunderous booms followed. Energy from the ruckus raged into a full fury. A path of destruction followed through the cranberry bog directly to the barn. A veil of mischievous apparitions appeared in the barn. The haunting continued well into the night.

Flames burst from the single porthole window. The glass shattered as the intensity of the temperature grew. Glass slivers shot like glistening darts into the night sky. Small sparks continued to ignite the fire.

Without warning, the inferno ceased as rapidly as it began. The window frame left blackened. It blistered the remaining wood around the rim back, like burned marshmallow.

As the evening wore on, so did the transient entities. Swiftly, each single outcast soul returned to its dwelling place. A procession of wispy, silky shades of green and gray mist swirled from where they came back into the vast eternal void.

I settled myself at the old picnic table behind the farmhouse. I sat, watched and waited as I did every day since the day she left. This time, smiling, I knew she will return soon.

Chapter Four

I ran up to the porch steps ahead of Ana, careful not to step into any of the holes along the floorboards. A waist high wooden rail set in concrete rimmed the porch. Flapping in the breeze, panels of torn window screens, with spider webs stuck to them, hung haphazardly from the porch windows. Leaning my hand on the ledge. I hadn't realized ants were crawling over my fingers. I let out a little girly squeak and swatted them away. A colony of ants were building their home into the brittle cement. Brightly colored wildflowers crawled up and over the wall. Weeds poked up through the decaying porch floor and were tangling around the rusty nails.

The front door was solid but splitting near the center. A decent push could easily crack it straight down the middle. A bolted padlock was hanging from the door. I braced against the door, preparing myself to give I door an energetic shove. A good heave and, to my surprise, the disintegrating lock snapped open with very little effort. The door-hinge let out a loud, distressing groan. The old house shook when I freed the door open. Dust floated around the living room and settled onto our heads.

The entryway had yellow and green peeling wallpaper hanging from the walls and extending into the rest of the living room.

Ana inspected the room and thought about the design on the wallpaper. 'It looked like the design might have been pineapples,' she supposed as she looked closer.

The shredded sheets draped over tops of the sofa, and chairs soiled with many fresh stains.

‘Seems rodents made their home here.’ I thought while examining the remains.

Ana and I wandered through the three rooms; each one was as bad as or worse than the next.

Walls smeared with graffiti and broken bottles littered every room of the house. I was about to go up the stairs but saw the steps were all rotted and would never hold me.

The master bedroom, on the first level, was heavily vandalized. Partially burned, broken boards from what had been a bed were in a pile in the middle of the room.

A vulgar, blackened mattress with rusty springs poking through; lay beside the woodpile.

“Oh, no, watch out!” shouted Ana.

“What now?”

The mattress was moving. At first, just slightly, but it began violently shaking. Almost like the mattress was about to vomit; then outburst a family of rats that made themselves at home in the warmth of the downy material. The rats scampered past their ankles and ran into openings in the walls.

Ana's eyes pierced into me. I knew what those eyes said.

“I know, just a few more minutes please,” I pleaded.

“OK, but I’m warning you!”

“I know, I know” I replied.

There was a shattered oval mirror on a spindle, which, when flipped, the backside revealed more graffiti. I glanced through the large window at the fantastic view overlooking the entire bog and

wondering how this enormous window has stayed intact through the years.

Ana poked around in the living room while I took in the view.

“Rik, get over here, there something you should see.” Ana shouted.

“Look over there, in that corner. Who is that?”

I reached down and picked up a photo of a woman framed in a circular, carved oak frame.

“I don’t know who she is, but she certainly looks a lot like my dad’s sister, Aunt Jane.”

“Your Aunt? Well, I suppose she looks like your Aunt Jane, but to me, she looks like the vision I saw at your dad’s house. I think she is the woman I saw. She’s even wearing the same velvet dress with the butterfly pin,” Ana insisted.

Rubbing his fingers around the frame, he felt a notch with a little tab imbedded in the back. He pulled the tab and the dusty backing popped off. There was writing on the back of the photo. Through the faded words, he could barely make out what read, ‘Margaret 1895’. A gust of wind blew through the room and the photo slid out of the frame. I caught it before it blew away and placed it back in the frame, then tucked it into my backpack.

I slung my pack over my shoulder and took Ana’s hand.

“Come on, I think we’ve found enough for today. You were right, we should have been more prepared. There’s a lot more to this thing. I think I better do my research.”

Ana wrapped her arm around my waist in agreement and pulled herself towards me.

As we were leaving, a murky fog slid under the doors and through the window cracks. The wind picked up and blew with a dominant force through the house. The fog grew fast and thickened into a heavy, sticky tar. It flooded the room and settled around our feet and ankles. I tried to move my feet, but the weight of this tar-like substance held me in place.

Ana jumped away before it reached her feet, and landing on the enormous sofa. I was stuck, firm to the floor. I pulled and tugged at my feet. Although my leg muscles were stronger now than they'd ever been. Spending this past summer working as a camp counselor, hiking up and down the trails of Mount Monadnock in New Hampshire, with a bunch of ten-year-olds. I could not pull free, even keeping my balance was almost impossible. My leg muscles quivered and started cramping. Sensing my body listing, I was about to fall.

"Rik, what's happening? This is totally insane?" Ana shouted.

Ana's eyes searched the room, looking for an escape route. The wind blew the front door open.

"I can make it to the door if I climb across this sofa, then to the chair. I'll be able to jump through the doorway. Maybe I can find a rope or something to help get you out."

Trying to hold myself upright. I was panicking. I was hyperventilating and I could feel a cold sweat cover me from the top of my head right down to my toes.

"OK, OK, this isn't real." I tried talking myself down, taking deep breaths, but it would not happen. I was going to pass out. My legs were trembling, and I was getting dizzy. I tried slowing my breathing. My knees were buckling, and then I fell into the thick, ashen tar.

Ana jumped through the doorway and then tumbled to the ground. Ana was yelling something at me, but I couldn't hear her. A gust of

wind rushed through the room. A loud screeching noise pierced my ears. The tarry substance was swirling throughout the room and then changed into what looked like mini funnels clouds of ash like powder. The ash slowly transposed into a mist and melded into the funnels, and then blew up through the vents and out of the house.

My mouth dropped when I saw the room was completely back to its original disheveled mess. Thankful for being free of the heavy weight, mixed with being afraid to move; I moved my feet slowly and then sprinted out of the house, grabbing Ana by the hand. I pulled her along with me.

“Come on, let’s get out of here!”

“This way” Ana pointed to the shortcut they took earlier. We ran as fast as our legs could carry us. We were jumping over ruts and sticks sloshing through mud puddles, tearing our clothes and skin on briars. Feeling like we were a safe distance from the house, we slowed down to a walk. I heard a soft clunk behind me and stopped short.

“Ana, where are you?” I assumed she was right behind me. I frantically back tracked to find her. Then I spotted her lying face down on the trail with her arm shoved into the thorny briars.

“Hey, what are you doing?” I shouted. “Are you OK?”

“My cell phone slipped out of my pocket when I jumped over that big branch back there.” She said while pointing at the trail.

“I can’t find it. I heard it fall; I think it should be right around here.” Ana said, as she carefully maneuvered her hand around the thorns.

“Why don’t I just call you on my cell and when it rings ta da, you’ll find it.”

“You are brilliant! Don’t you think I thought about that one already?” Ana replied. “I turned off the volume before we went into the farmhouse. I was afraid it would go off and trigger some crazy spirit or something.”

“OK, then I stand corrected. Please accept my most gracious apology,” I said, bowing down to Ana like she was royalty.

“Apology accepted,” she said as she reached up and smacked my favorite cap off of my head.

It landed on the trail’s edge next to a small pile of rocks where five stones piled on top of one another. The largest on the bottom and then consecutively stacked the smallest on top. There were also five stones of equal size lined up in a row in front of the stack. It looked like some sort of trail marker. The cell phone was under my cap in the muddy ditch. I scoped my hand down to reach it as a thorny briar grabbed my hand. I snatched the phone and pulled my hand away, coming away with a few more bloody scratches.

“I found your phone,” I announced.

“You did! Thank you so much!” Ana jumped up and wrapped her arms around me, and planted a kiss on my lips.

My face flushed. “Wow, be sure to let me know if you lose your phone again. I’ll be glad to help!”

Ana grabbed the phone from me with a quick snatch.

“Not so quick. I’m not sure it will work. It was in a mud puddle. Look at my hand. It’s all scratched up. I think that briar bush was trying to pull on my hand.” I said.

“Are you serious? That sounds nuts. Although, I think anything’s possible here,” Ana said while pushing the buttons on her cell.

“You’re right, it’s not working, oh great!” Ana scowled as she stuck her phone into her pocket. “And the very idea of a briar bush grabbing at your hand. This place is just wrong!”

“OK, forget I said anything. It must have been my overactive imagination. Let’s just get out of here.”

I thought about that stack of stone and remembered I was going to mention it to Ana.

“Come over here, check this out.”

“Wow, I wonder how long that’s been there. It looks like an old trail marker. I learned about those at Girl Scout camp,” Ana said. Our heads turned at the same time and looked towards the woods in the direction the marker was pointing.

“It looks like there might have been a footpath going through the woods that way. Maybe it’s another shortcut to the bog. Do you want to try it? It seems like it might be a more direct route,” Ana said in a cautious but excited pitch.

“Pretty daring for you, don’t you think?” I teased. Ana lightly punched my shoulder.

“Well, if you think it might be a more direct route, let’s go for it.” I agreed.

I thought, ‘Just in case this route doesn’t work out, I won’t have to be blamed for it.’

I directed Ana ahead of me along the footpath where it constricted. Gigantic oak and maple trees had fallen from an earlier storm. Only one person at a time could travel this narrow footpath. The vines and briars didn’t cultivate very well along this trail, making the route much easier to travel.

“I like this path better already!” exclaimed Ana. “Those nasty thorns and little black bugs aren’t on this route.”

“Me too, even though it’s really narrow, at least we’re not getting torn up here. I just hope it brings us back to my truck.” Rik said.

We continued for a short distance as the footpath became wide enough for both of us to walk side by side. Ana saw the path widen first. I enjoyed the closeness of the tight pathway. I reached my arms out to grab Ana. She sprinted ahead. Unaware of my lame effort, she ran toward a bright light.

“Look, Rik, way down at the end of the trail!”

I tripped over a log, lost my balance and fell forward. Something grabbed my leg and pulled me backwards. Twisting my body over and kicking with my other leg wriggling free. Without looking back, I got to my feet and ran towards Ana.

“Ana, wait! Don’t go there. Wait for me. It might be dangerous,” I shouted.

A thunderous boom echoed as I watched Ana absorb into the light. The brightness faded into simmering lightning bolts. I ran even faster to catch up to her. I caught her in just enough time to slip into the dissolving glow.

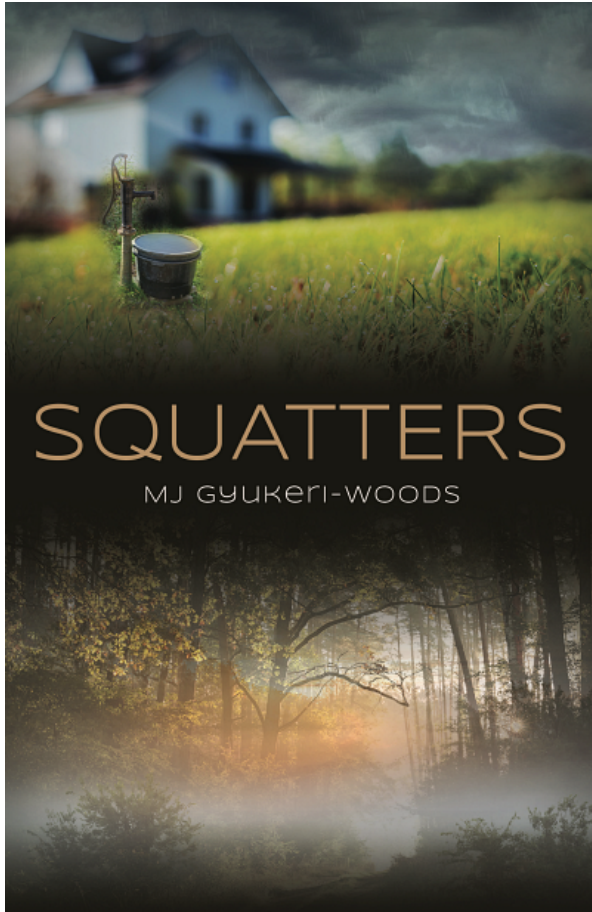
It sucked me into a porthole; reaching for something to hold on to. My hands were sliding around in a circular motion, trying to grab anything within my reach. It suspended me in nothingness, in a bright light with the strength of hundreds of men was carrying me off like he was a feather.

“Ana, are you there?” my voice was straining, screaming became impossible. The shrilling sound of speed was blasting through my ears.

‘If Ana was there, she’d never hear me, I thought. ‘She couldn’t possibly see me either.’

The brilliance of the light was so intense I had to keep my eyes closed. I could feel my eyes burning, even with them closed, the powerful glare searing through my eyelids. The momentum picked up even faster. I was gasping in mouthfuls of air, trying to breathe. My body was bound to the core, completely secure within the spiral; I tried fighting against this tight hold. I struggled to move my arms and legs; forced even more rigid to the beam. The more I resisted, the tighter the hold. Giving in to the fact I could not move; I felt myself slip into the embrace. I could feel my breathing relax and slowly allowing the light to carry me off. The brightness dimmed, and I could finally open my eyes. My breathing continued to be difficult even as the speed decreased.

I carefully opened my eyes and peeked through little slots. The white brilliance shifted into a soft shade of pink, then to pale blue, and finally enveloped in an indigo blue sky. I braced myself, curling into a ball, and held onto my knees.



A compulsively readable thriller, a lovesick ghost's commitment to reawaken his untimely death. Using a map, photo and a note found hidden in a lock box. Rik and Ana head out to solve a crime from the past traveling through portals.

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