



*A tale of two children, a boy and a girl, who grow up as neighbors in an isolated forest, where they become part of the supernatural warfare between good and evil.*


## **The Light in The Forest**

By Gabriel Sinclair

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GABRIEL SINCLAIR

THE  
LIGHT  
IN THE  
FOREST

*Children caught in the middle of the  
supernatural battle between good and evil*

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## Chapter One

Quentin Kirlan kicked a pebble while fighting back the tears. That girl his age was in the process of moving in next door. He couldn't see her from his yard because of the dense border of pine and maple trees that separated their two homes, on this the eastern end of the backcountry wilderness borough known as Brightwater Bay, in northern Michigan. Their truck had just arrived. His two German shepherd guard dogs pranced about in a frenzy in their pen, hoping it was time for a run.

“Gardy, Lucy, hush!” he commanded.

They whined in protest. He and Jimmy Lee, his former neighbor, had spent many hours running with the dogs throughout the thicket behind their log cabin homes. They played army, cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, hide and seek, basketball, and soccer, because they loved to run.

Jimmy had been gone a week now since his dad got a job as a ranger at Yellowstone. Quentin wept when he lost his best buddy, because no other kids his age lived here now, on the east side of Brightwater, except this six-year-old girl, named Rachel Starr. His parents told him what they hoped was good news the day after Jimmy left; a girl his age was moving in, and they would both be attending the new school at the monastery behind their homes. It brightened him a little, but he worried that she would be too fat to do much running. He planned to sneak a peek at her through the place between the pines where he could part the branches.

Quentin walked through the open field between the homes through the rich, green grass. Brightwater Bay, unlike some of the other backcountry towns he had seen pictures of, was a visual paradise. Flowering dogwoods blazed their glory everywhere. Weeping willows bordered the country road in front of his house, and their interlocking boughs formed a canopy. Billionaire Bill Baylor regulated the small population by not building any more cabins to sell. Bill owned all the

land except for those who had already bought cabins before 1995. The hunting and fishing, although limited, was open to tourists – as well as the skiing and canoeing. Ordinarily, Quentin and Jimmy would be helping their dads with the canoeing, but today he got a pass to meet his new friend. Most everybody here worked as rangers, the guardians of a vast wildlife refuge.

He gasped, suddenly worried that the new neighbors might have a dog – a big dog that might confront him. Most everybody had a dog in these parts. He ran for the maple, which he knew he could climb lickety-split, and waited at the base, his heart pounding. He heard a woman's voice exclaiming how beautiful it all was. Voices traveled clear and far in these parts. Quentin waited a few minutes but heard no barks except those of his dogs; then he crept over to the spot between the pines where he could peep through. He saw a beautiful, red-haired woman carrying an ironing board down a truck ramp. She was wearing a flowery, multi-colored pullover, blue jeans, and black tennis shoes. A wiry man with stern, blazing blue eyes followed, carrying a hardwood chair. Quentin shuddered thinking of him as a dangerous-looking hombre. He peered into the darkness of the long truck, searching for a little girl. Two well-muscled black men wearing tank tops emerged carrying a tan sofa. He waited but didn't see any little girl.

*She must be inside the house.*

A little girl then skipped out of the house as if on cue, then into the yard while talking to a bespectacled baby doll. An abundance of thick, red hair covered half of her face and shoulders. She wore a white button-down shirt, brown slacks, and brown leather shoes. *Church clothes*, he thought, which were not suitable for what he wanted to do. Her eyes were different, unusual: blue like the bay in the middle, and blue like the sky around the center. But she was skinny and pretty with her thick lips. Quentin smiled dreamily. *Maybe even prettier than Gemma Jenkins. Maybe the prettiest girl in the world!* But that didn't matter much; he wasn't into the mushy stuff. The little girl narrowed her eyes and looked about her with a troubled expression. She shivered

and embraced the doll. Quentin guessed her to be a city slicker who still couldn't believe all the woods out here.

"How do you like it, Rachel?" her mother asked.

"Never seen so many trees. It's so very quiet."

Quentin recalled his father referring to the stillness of Brightwater as the great quiet.

"Look how lovely it is, Rachel. And you will have playmates too because a boy your age named Quentin lives next door and Bill Baylor's daughter Rindy is six too."

Rachel turned and looked in his direction and Quentin let the branches snap back into place.

Quentin shuddered while thinking of stuck-up Rindy Baylor playing nearby. She had bullied him at the old school, and he had returned the fire in the form of cracked pencils, rips, burps, funny faces, and dirty looks. She had branded him and Jimmy Lee as nonsense lovers, hogs (because their homework and desks weren't immaculate), and bums (because his dad wasn't super-rich, and his lack of ambition, he guessed). Sure, he scorched off; he wanted to be a kid, that's all. He was six years old and in no hurry to grow up like Rindy. Five other girls his age and three boys lived on the west side of Brightwater. Rindy had brainwashed the two pretty girls to scorn him. Quentin referred to them as the terrible trio.

Rachel was beautiful too, so no doubt Rindy would try to brainwash her into believing he was a bum. And the heavy snow wouldn't keep Rindy away because Bill Baylor owned a helicopter, which he kept in his yard. Bill used that helicopter to visit his twin cousins at the monastery behind Quentin's home. Quentin shook his head, bewildered as to how kin folk could be so different.

Tears misted his eyes. He thanked God for his cousin Tom, who was coming to visit him this summer. He hoped and prayed that Rachel would become his friend. He wondered if another situation like this

existed in the whole United States where a six-year-old boy had only a little girl to play with.

Quentin peeped through the branches again and gasped because it appeared that Rachel had spotted him, her gaze centering on the spot where he stood. *No way*: he was too good of a scout for that. He peeped again. Her narrowed eyes flitted from right to left as if she knew someone was out there. She stood alone, without the doll, now that her mother had entered the house carrying the doll and a toaster.

“Oh, look at the pretty white light in the trees, Mommy!” Rachel said, pointing to the treetops.

*What was she talking about?* Quentin wondered, so he looked up himself.

Brother John Bain gasped in wonder at the radiant white light in the treetops from the turret above the monastery, where he had been watching the arrival of the new neighbors. *It must be an angel*, he thought. *How like the Lord to reveal an angel to two little children in this isolated woodland.* None of the adults were present to witness this miracle – yet. The light held the two children spellbound. John Bain prayed that the adults would emerge from the house to marvel at this vision. Beatific visions often resulted in conversions.

A black sphere suddenly appeared beside the radiant light, creating an effect like a lunar eclipse from John Bain’s angle. This frightened the little girl, who ran into the house. The little boy hurled a stone and both objects flitted away at a supernatural speed that left John Bain breathless.

*What was that all about?* Surely the dark sphere represented the presence of evil. *Okay. Okay. It was no doubt a call to prayer. The forces of light and darkness would be fighting for souls as they did everywhere, so why the spectacle? Time would tell.*

The little girl was leading her parents, once again clutching her doll, pointing to the place where she had seen what she described as two small UFOs. The mother, a beautiful woman, stood with hands on accentuated, curvy hips with open-mouthed incredulity. John closed his eyes to the figure that was causing his pulse to race and his libido to blaze. It had been over four years now since his wife had dropped dead of a brain aneurism and he had turned toward God rather than away from him, following in the footsteps and advice of his father. Mark Bain had spent eight years in a monastery and never regretted it. John had nearly completed his five-year stint for a teaching degree when Belinda's untimely death occurred. Mark told him he would find solace in the arms of God at a monastery with supportive men in a place called Brightwater Bay, which could use an extra teacher. John thought his libido would get a break, out here in this backcountry, but after looking at that lovely flower he might need a girlfriend to cool the flames, if he could find one out here. He had joined the Jesuit order as a lay brother or Third Order brother, leaving the option to marry open.

His father had told him nothing about the place except that it was in the backcountry woods. The beauty had astonished him. He should have known that billionaire Bill Baylor would settle for nothing less.

"I saw a black circle and a twinkling light right there in the trees and now they're gone. Mom, what kind of forest is this?"

The mother gaped about her with open-mouthed perplexity and flinched when she saw a man watching them from what looked like the turret of a castle.

"Maybe it's an enchanted forest, Rachel. Look, there is a castle on top of that mountain."

"Oh my!" Rachel whispered. "Do you mean it's a magical forest?"

Quentin decided to make an appearance because the UFOs had freaked him out, and he wanted to be close to some adults. He could also show off his abilities as a woodsman by appearing out of nowhere.



“Oh, look, Mommy, there’s a little boy!”

“Oh, you must be Quentin. I’m Cathy, and this is my daughter Rachel Starr.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Quentin said, and extended his hand.

Rachel hid behind her mother.

“Rachel, what is wrong? Why won’t you shake hands with Quentin?”

“He might be a sorcerer.”

“I’m not. I didn’t have anything to do with those UFOs.”

Cathy dropped her head, shook it, and shrugged her shoulders.

“Nobody told me about UFO sightings,” she said with a sigh.

“It was a pretty, glittering light. I think the bright one was an angel,” Quentin said.

“What was the black one?” Rachel asked.

“Maybe a devil but he’s been whopped. And I think the angel chased him away.”

Rachel tentatively made her way closer to him and held out her hand. He shook it, and for some reason everything faded into the background except his contact with her hand. A huff of astonishment escaped his throat as he wondered what that was all about.

“Nice to meet you, Quentin.”

“Same here.”

Well, that was a switch compared to what he was accustomed to hearing from the terrible trio. Cathy turned back toward the truck and Quentin flinched again from a glimpse of the glaring blue eyes of the man he took to be her father. He wished he could change into his

favorite TV cowboy, Drifter, right then, packing that pair of big six-guns.

“Are there more than two kids our age out here?”

“Yeah, but they live on the west end of Brightwater about thirty miles away. I’m all you got on this side, especially when it snows – unless Rindy visits you by helicopter.” Quentin was making a case for why they should get along. “Oh, and Rindy is a bully and a stuck-up snob...to me.”

“Why?”

Did he detect a hint of suspicion in her gaze? He remembered his parents describing the Bayers as big shots, continually communicating an air of self-importance. It hit him one day what they meant after being around Rindy a few months – stuck up. He had asked his mother why this was so.

“Different reasons,” she had said. “They believe everyone should be rich and think of us poor folk as lazy and ignorant. People idolize them, adding to the illusion that they’re better than others. They believe they are smarter than most, which places them in a higher class.”

“Rindy thinks I’m a poor, ignorant, slob because I don’t get all A’s, live in a mansion, and I’m not a teacher’s pet all the time,” Quentin said.

*Rindy will tell Rachel I burp too, but no sense in telling her that now; It might turn her off.* Rindy had called him a hog, so he figured he might as well be one.

Rachel looked at her own home. It wasn’t a mansion, but it wasn’t a shack either.

“Why does Rindy want to visit me? We don’t live in a mansion.”

“Pretty girls are okay with her.”

Rachel dropped her gaze and pushed a half-moon trail with her foot through the grass. She seemed ready to cry. Yes, tears brimmed her eyes. Quentin felt the strange impulse to hold her hand.

Rachel watched her mother enter the house and said, “Lots of people tell me I’m pretty – except my dad.”

Quentin was astonished. He glimpsed Mr. Starr, glaring at him from the corner of his eye, but he averted his gaze.

“Does your dad give you...lots of whippin’s?”

“No, he just doesn’t talk much. He never hugs me or tells me he loves me!” Rachel whimpered.

Hand went to mouth when Quentin saw the teardrop fall. *Crying already?* He hoped she wouldn’t be a crybaby. He didn’t want her parents to see those tears and make a bad first impression. He quietly revealed his plight to Rachel about making a bad impression, who nodded and turned her head away from her folks, drying her eyes on her sleeve.

“Mrs. Starr, can Rachel and I play on my swing? It’s just right over yonder under the big oak tree in my yard.”

Cathy responded with a troubled expression. “Can’t see over there because of those trees.” Cathy then noticed a huge bay window on the third floor of their cabin, realizing that a gap in the tree line would enable her to see the yard. “Okay, for a little while. Don’t swing too high, you two.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Quentin said, and they started walking.

Quentin waited until they were out in the field before asking, “Why did your beautiful mom marry your mean dad? Is your mom mean too?” *She certainly did not look it*, Quentin thought.

“No, but he saved her from somebody called pimp. That’s all they tell me.”

“Heard tell of ’em but can’t remember where.”

Rachel suddenly leaped behind his back, cowering. *Now what?* Quentin wondered, gaping about. Then it hit him: the dogs were growling.

“Rachel don’t be afraid. It’s just Gardy and Lucy, my watchdogs.”

“Why do we need watchdogs?” she whimpered. He felt her body quivering.

“We live by a wildlife refuge stocked with coyotes, wolves, bears, cougars, and bucks.”

“Is that why that big fence is behind the trees?”

“Yep, and it’s wired to an alarm system connected to both of our homes in case a bear tries to mess with it.”

Rachel shuddered. “Anything ever get through?”

“A snake, but Guardy and Lucy chewed it to pieces.” Quentin immediately regretted saying that. He might be running by himself from now on. *Oh well...* His parents frowned on him running through the thicket anyway.

“I want to show you something, Rachel. Let’s get closer.”

Rachel followed, behind Quentin. She shuddered from the dogs savagely rasping and from around fifty feet from their cage she wrapped her arms around his chest and buried her face against his back, refusing to look at the snarling animals. *Yuck again*, he thought.

Quentin managed to position her beside him with her eyes closed. He felt giddy with anticipation as to what was going to happen next. He placed his arm around her shoulders, gave the dogs the sign of friendship, and yelled, “Guardy, Lucy, friend! Guardy, Lucy, friend! Open your eyes now, Rachel.”

The dog’s stance changed dramatically to one of whining and pleading to meet the new acquaintance. They pranced about, flashing doggie grins for her to come closer. Rachel gasped with astonishment and whispered, “Wow!”

Quentin whispered for her to give them commands like “sit,” “speak,” “roll over,” “pray,” and “give me your paw.” Each time the dogs obeyed, and Rachel giggled.

“Ho, Quentin!” somebody yelled. “Must be the new neighbors. Pleased to meet ya, lass.”

Rachel gasped at a smiling man who emerged from the brushwood at the other end of Quentin’s yard with a fishing pole over his shoulder.

Rachel snickered. “Quentin, he looks like Santa Claus.”

He had a white beard, long hair, dimples, dark eyes, the cheeks, the belly, and a ready smile.

“That’s Henry Jacobs, the writer also known as the Happy Hermit. He lives by himself next door. The Baylors *have* used him to play Santa Claus at some of their parties. They help promote his books and he gives most of his money to charity. I believed he was Santa Claus for a while until I saw him peeing at the pond. That was the day I figured it out and my parents spilled the beans. They told me Santa was just a fairy tale, but God was real.”

“My mom believes in Jesus, but my dad is an atheist.”

She suddenly leaped into his arms in another crushing embrace. *Yuck again!* And her hair tickled his nose. Quentin noticed Henry Jacobs’ belly laughing on his way to the pond. Quentin sighed like one blowing up a balloon. Then it hit him why this was happening.

“Rachel, you’re afraid of that black UFO, aren’t you?”

“Y-yes!”

“Talking about God made you think about that black UFO, and you’re afraid it might return.”

“Yes. Are you afraid?”

“No,” and Quentin had to think why. “We have a lot of spiritual guns in these woods, girl. Up yonder, that building that looks like a

castle is a monastery full of praying monks. Mr. Jacobs prays all the time. The devil aint going to hang around here. Isn't that right, Mr. Jacobs?" He spoke loud enough to make sure Henry heard all that he had said.

"Aye, lad, these woods are full of love, joy, peace, and angels."

Cathy Starr lowered her double-barreled ACP 1911 pistol when the dogs responded playfully to the sign of friendship. She was standing on the third floor in the east wing of the house, behind one of the roll-out partitions of the big bay window that spanned half the length of that wall. The gun packed some serious punch, and she knew how to use it. She scanned the woods searching for anything human, animal, or unexplainable. She gasped at the sight of the fat guy who emerged from the brushwood. *My God, he was the spitting image of one of the popular pictures of Santa Claus! Even John Starr might give his flicker of a grin at this guy.* She quickly hid her pistol beneath the window seat and smiled at this wonder of a man who emanated the Christmas spirit of love and joy.

Cathy saw Rachel leap into Quentin's arms. The way she clung to him communicated fear. *What in God's name was she afraid of?* Cathy tried to hear what the children were saying by cracking the window. Even from this distance, of about fifty yards, she could make out a few words: *black UFOs, spiritual guns, praying monks, angels... She was afraid of the devil!* Cathy collapsed and her butt hit the floor. *Rachel had seen what she thought was a devil out here in this isolated paradise.*

Cathy had enough of the devil for two lifetimes. She believed in him all right, because she had suffered through the hell of sex trafficking since she was a little girl. Her parents had sold her to a child pornographer. And the pornographer had sold her to a pusher/pimp, called Daddy Jones, who used her as a stripper and a prostitute for over five years. He used drugs to help keep her in line. One summer night in Whitehall, a seedy part of Columbus Ohio, a Christian named Billy

Williams posing as a customer tried to help her escape to a safe house. Unfortunately, Daddy Jones' twin brother Jimmy spotted the man and didn't trust him. He accosted them at the bottom of the rear outdoor stairwell, and Jones beat Billy to death.

Cathy had been too frozen by fear to run. He then turned his wrath upon her. He slapped her so hard she fell over the rail. But someone else had been watching that evening. Someone who had also been abused as a child. Someone who had watched his mother suffer from his abusive father for many years. John Starr, now a professional kickboxer, was reliving those horrifying memories while parked in that motel parking lot with a fifth of Jack Daniel's. He ran out of the car, kicked Jimmy in the nuts from behind, then mule-kicked him in the jaw with the hard heel of a boot after he dropped to his knees. This was followed by another roundhouse kick with such velocity that Cathy knew from the crack that it had broken his jaw.

John pushed her farther behind the stairwell as a gun boomed from the second floor and a bullet zipped by. John responded by shooting the fallen pusher/pimp in the shoulder. It was Cathy's first exposure to the ACP 1911 double-barreled pistol, the likes of which she had never seen before. Then the cops showed up, commanding John and everybody on the second floor to freeze. The cops found themselves in a gunfight instead.

The gunfight turned into a siege, with a SWAT team and tear gas, but Daddy Jones got away.

Five girls managed to escape to freedom that day and Jimmy went to prison to await trial. She went to that safe house as one walking in a dream. She didn't know what it meant to be free. Her life had been dominated by evil. She dated John, who seemed kind compared to the monsters she had been with. The press called him a hero after the trial, at which Jimmy was sentenced to life, and that is probably why the Brightwater rangers and Bill Baylor welcomed him with open arms. He represented safety to her, and they eventually married.

John injured his knee in a car accident that ended his boxing career.

He turned to guns and forestry, transforming her into a sharpshooter. She realized over the years that she had married a cold man who had trouble showing affection other than a flicker of a smile. She also eventually realized he had chosen forestry to stop himself from killing Daddy Jones, and more like him. He feared his dark side, confessing that he enjoyed killin' those that needed killin'. He read westerns nearly every day of his life, perceiving himself as a man born at the wrong time.

She suffered from occasional post-traumatic stress, which was why she always kept a gun close by. She hoped and prayed that Daddy Jones and the concrete jungle were gone forever. But they kept practicing with those guns in case he came back for revenge because they were the ones who put his brother behind bars for life.

She had turned to the God of Billy Williams, and at times experienced His presence as a reality. She also realized a few years back what had kept her sane throughout her tumultuous life. A quiet voice had spoken to her continually that life was not meant to be this way. There wasn't supposed to be any cruelty or death. It had influenced her subconsciously.

Something had gone wrong with mankind.

She had accepted the Christian interpretation of evil because it explained the horrendous evil she had encountered – evil so evil she could only define it as supernatural.

The prospect of being alone for hours a day with her memories frightened her so she determined to make as many friends as possible, especially Quentin's mother Carrie and the Santa Claus next door. Quentin and Santa were consoling her, and Rachel flashed them her endearing, unforgettable, megawatt smile. Cathy breathed a sigh of relief because she appeared to be consoled.

John entered the room carrying a lamp, noticing the gun. He rushed to the window with that ever-present *don't mess with me attitude*, glaring through the pane. Even John recoiled with wide-eyed astonishment, noticing the passing Santa look-alike who turned and



waved at the children with a smile. He gaped at Cathy with a huff of astonishment. She burst into laughter unable to remember an expression like that. Her eyes misted with tears as she remembered a lovely song called “Yes, There Is a Santa Claus.” She wanted to sing it, but John would be unmoved just as he was unmoved by anything romantic. She had been transformed, however, by her obsession with romantic novels into someone who wanted more than just a safe space and sex that always happened after practice at the shooting ranges. She didn’t want to be Bonnie Parker or Calamity Jane. She dreamed of romance. But her post-traumatic stress and her marriage pledge kept her bonded to John. It took John a minute or two to compose himself before he looked from the gun to her with hungry eyes.

“It was just a couple of watchdogs growling from inside of a pen. Quentin gave the sign of friendship and they have reacted in a friendly manner. I searched the woods and couldn’t find any sign of activity. I believe Quentin is a good kid.”

After living with the worst of the worst of humanity for nearly two decades, she had developed an uncanny ability to discern a con artist or an evil person. Her instinct told her Quentin, although prone to mischief, was a good kid. John had grown to trust her judgment. She also trusted the two men helping them to move their furniture.

Quentin pushed Rachel gently on the swing like her mother wanted.

“I’m allowed to go a little higher than that!”

That thrilled Quentin. She might be open to more exciting ventures than playing house. He pushed her a little higher, noticing how fragile she looked compared to Jimmy.

“What do you like to do, Rachel?”

She turned her head to look over her shoulder at him thoughtfully.

“I like to...jump rope...play hopscotch.” She noticed a basketball pole in the driveway. “Kickball...catchers...hide and seek...basketball...and I like to sing and pretend.”

“Sing?”

“Yes, my teacher back in Columbus said I have talent to be a singer. I want to be a singer and a movie star when I grow up.”

Quentin couldn't suppress a snicker.

“What's so funny?”

Quentin looked around at all the woods. “I'm wondering if this is the right place to showcase your talents.”

She frowned. “Might not live here forever.”

“Wouldn't it be great to be a kid forever?” Quentin asked, dreamy-eyed.

Rachel stammered. “People adore me when I sing, Quentin,” she said, with a visionary gleam in her eye.

He scratched his head and squinted on that one.

“Rachel, I'll be your friend, and you don't have to do much singing for me except for a cowboy song or two.”

She smiled at that and swung herself a little higher.

Rachel suddenly leaped off the swing with a shriek, swatting at something on her arm.

“Quentin, it was a big, ugly fly, and I think it stung me!”

“It was a black fly. Sometimes they bite up here.”

“What am I going to do if the flies bite?” she whined.

“You need some insect repellent and some cream called Afterbite. Come into my playroom and I'll apply them for you.”

Quentin's downstairs playroom adjoined the garage. He sprayed her arm and applied the ointment while she trembled.

"You'll be fine, Rachel. This will take care of everything."

An image of her in a dress suddenly appeared in his mind. *Odd. What if she had worn a dress and a black fly had bitten her butt? Should he spray there if she had worn a dress? Girls were different down there.* He suddenly wanted a peek. It might answer some questions. But was it right to ask Rachel to show him? He didn't know and decided not to take a chance.

He noticed his toy gun belt with the two holsters wrapped around the back of a chair and got a funny idea.

"Hey, let's see if you can be like Annie Oakley or Calamity Jane."

He buckled the belt around her waist and placed the black cowboy hat upon her head in front of a full-length mirror. The pistols looked enormous on her.

"Show me what you got, Rachel. Draw!"

She clumsily hauled the pistols out and almost fell back as she shot at the ceiling.

"Whoa, girl, you got to do better than that! Everybody in these parts gotta learn how to shoot. I thought you said that you like to pretend."

"I'm too shook up right now."

"Okay, okay. Take some deep breaths and let me know when you're ready. But let's do it outside tenderfoot."

Quentin paced back and forth, trying to quiet the whining dogs, while she took her breaths.

It took several minutes before she said, "I'm ready."

“Now pretend there’s some injuns or some bad hombres gunnin’ for you. You want to be a movie star someday so you might as well start learning how to pretend now.”

*Yeah*, he told himself again, *this idea of pretending held a lot of possibilities*. He actually felt like a movie director.

She faced the woods. Her eyes narrowed into slits and glared with deadly intention. She pulled the pistols like a pro and fired away with a rhythm and a stance that he rated the best he had seen a kid do in Brightwater.

“Wow, girl, that was fantastic! You keep that up and you’ll make captain! How did you change like that?”

“I played Cinderella in our school back in Columbus. My teacher said I’m a natural actress.”

A thoughtful silence passed during which Quentin wondered about *his* future. Rachel asked him the standard question kids ask: “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

His heart gave him an answer that astonished him.

“I want to be like Henry Jacobs,” he thought aloud.

“Why?”

“He’s...he’s...jolly. He’s a good, happy man.”

Then an image of Drifter appeared in his mind.

“I want to be one of the good guys too, Rachel.”

“Well, I certainly hope so,” she said, crossing her arms and tapping her foot, with misty eyes.

*She doesn’t want me to be like her dad*, he realized.

“Rachel, I just want to have some fun. I like to pretend too.”

Rachel started from a rumbling sound.

“Easy, tenderfoot, that’s the garage door. My dad’s coming home from work.”

Kevin Kirlan appeared in the yard, trying to stifle laughter. Quentin wondered if his mother was watching from the back porch window.

“Quentin, why do you have them guns on a lady?”

“She shoots better than me and Jimmy, Dad. She wants to be a movie star someday, and I’m going to prepare her for all the roles she’s going to play.”

“Is that a good idea, Rachel?” Kevin asked.

Rachel nodded and *smiled*.

*That’s a smile made for Hollywood*, Kevin thought.

“Nice to meet you, Rachel. We’re coming over to greet your parents and help you unload,” a feminine voice said from the porch.

A thin woman with long, raven black hair, deep lips and beautiful almond shaped eyes emerged from the shadow of the porch, holding a canvas. *She’s beautiful*, Rachel thought; and Quentin favored her. *These must be high-class woods with scenery and people like this*. Kevin introduced his wife as Carrie Kirlan. Carrie showed Rachel her painting, which had captured her smiling on a swing with the old oak tree and the pristine woods in the background.

“Hey, where am I at?” Quentin asked.

Carrie laughed. “Didn’t have time to get to you.”

“How beautiful! I hope to show talents like that someday,” Rachel said.

“Well, we might as well start unloading. I want to see some of your toys,” Quentin said.

Rachel rolled her eyes, then remembered the gun.

“I have one toy you will like, a gun,” she said quietly.

“You do? Cool! I want to see what type it is,” Quentin said.

“My dad smiles at me sometimes when I play with my gun,” she said with a frown and a shrug.

“Well, it looks like we better be packin’ some heat. You need to show your dad how you can shoot.”

Rachel imagined herself playing the role of a gun-toting, femme fatale, in a movie her family had watched recently. Her father’s eyes were riveted to the movie screen, and he flashed his grin. She hoped to impress him someday.

Quentin shuddered as they approached the spot where they had seen the dark circle, grateful for the presence of the adults. Rachel remembered too, for she reached out and grasped his hand, then looked at him with wide-eyed surprise before letting go.

Quentin’s parents noticed and gave each other an arched eyebrow look.

“What if the situation doesn’t change by puberty? What if they are the only two their age living on this side of Brightwater?” Carrie asked quietly.

“He’ll have to know about the birds and the bees.”

Quentin watched the interplay between the adults while they unloaded. Mr. Starr was indeed the hard, mean-looking quiet hombre. Cathy Starr was really friendly as he suspected, and not a put on.

Quentin and Rachel were able to carry a small toy chest between them, which Quentin suspected contained the gun. They struggled up three flights of stairs to the room Rachel said was to be her bedroom. The headboard and mattress were already in place before a huge bay window that faced his bedroom window. An image flashed in Quentin’s mind that astonished him. He saw himself spying on Rachel from his window with a pair of binoculars, which he quickly

dismissed. Rachel pulled out a gun that was a clip type instead of a revolver. He was especially impressed when she opened the handle, revealing a mechanism for caps. John Starr walked in carrying an end table and flicked them a grin.

“See, I get a grin when I’m holding a gun, Quentin. My dad lives like we are still in the Old West. He reads westerns every night.”

“Tarnation! But he’s a good guy, not a bad guy, right?”

“He’s a man of few words like a cowboy out by himself on the lone prairie.”

“‘The Lone Prairie.’ That’s a song I want you to sing for me – someday!”

Rachel rolled her eyes. “Never heard of it.”

They walked down for another load and Quentin found himself laden down with baby dolls, much to Rachel’s chagrin. Quentin noticed the bespectacled doll glaring at him from the crook of his arm. He swallowed hard, daring to take another sidelong glance at that face. He started because the little old bitty looked downright mean.

*What’s Rachel doing with this ugly thing?*

He threw the dolls on the mattress, elated when the little old bat tumbled head over heels onto the floor.

“Granny! Oh no, granny!” Rachel cried, running to the other side of the bed.

She embraced the doll, not realizing the glasses were cockeyed.

“Oh, Quentin, you must never hurt Granny Gill! She’s one of my dearest friends!” she pleaded.

Quentin imagined her conversing with a baby doll.

He talked to his picture of Jesus on the right side of his bedroom wall, beside the door. Jesus responded through the Bible, a Bible class

teacher, his conscience, and through what Henry Jacobs called impressions. He always tried to keep his mind and heart attuned to impressions he might receive from Jesus.

“If you need to talk to someone, talk to me,” Quentin said.

He thought of mentioning Jesus too, but he needed all the company he could get in these lonesome parts.

She shrugged her shoulders and tilted her head a few times like she was considering it an option.

She gingerly sat the doll down in the corner of the room, and Quentin readied himself to bolt if the thing gave him the evil eye. The blue chips in the plastic eye sockets settled into a position that didn't meet his gaze. He breathed a sigh of relief but turned away, afraid of pushing his luck. He had seen an evil doll movie, and it had freaked him out. The ugly doll made him wonder: “Rachel, do you like scary stories.”

“Sometimes. But I don't like pretending to be a monster like *The Thing*.”

“The old version?”

She nodded ruefully.

Quentin didn't admit it, but that old movie had scared him too.

Mrs. Starr went out of her way to be friendly to everyone. Mr. Starr spoke as little as possible, preferring short sentences when he did speak. Quentin gradually noticed Rachel was oblivious to making eye contact with him for several hours. After her bed and vanity were assembled, she sat before the three mirrors looking at herself. Quentin positioned himself to where his reflection appeared beside her. She looked at him with a prissy expression and said, “Sir Knight, you may kiss the hand of the princess.” Quentin responded with a sigh of futility.

“I'm just not into the mushy stuff, Rachel.”



“Could use a hug now and then.”

Another sigh. “I suppose I could bend a little. Will you bend some too?”

“What do you want?”

“Don’t let Rindy brainwash you into believing I’m a bum. Let’s be silly kids who just want to have fun. Play some basketball, soccer, cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians...”

“Hopscotch, jump rope, jacks, house, and knights,” she added.

“Okay, it’s a deal, but I never pretended to be a knight in shining armor.”

“We live by a castle.”

The castle-like monastery inspired the fantasy. She tried to imagine him as a dashing knight and concluded that he was indeed good-looking like his mother. She told him so.

“I look like a girl?” he asked, grimacing at his reflection.

“He’s a handsome lad,” Cathy Starr said, entering the room, overhearing the conversation. “She has benighted you, Quentin. That’s quite an honor.”

Quentin’s brow furrowed. “Never gave much thought to the knights of old. But I *have* pretended to be a cave man with a club.”

Rachel shrugged with a small smile.

Cathy snickered. She leaned toward the idea that the safest life for Rachel would be for them to marry and live nearby. The Kirlans owned their own two acres of land. They could build a lovely home just beyond the oak, or in the field between them. Rachel showed no signs of addictive cravings even though Cathy had been hooked on just about everything on the black market. Cathy herself suffered no withdrawal after she had been rescued.

Two miracles that had inspired faith.

She wondered if she had passed dormant, exploitable genes onto Rachel that Satan would love to take advantage of. That's why she wanted her to stay here, away from the concrete jungle, and the possibility of a vengeful Daddy Jones.

"Where did you go, in here?" Quentin asked, pointing to her head.

"I was a princess, in that castle up yonder," she said, mimicking him.

Quentin nodded, with thoughtful approval. Yeah, that powerful ability to pretend held some promise.

Quentin gradually noticed as the evening continued that he couldn't make eye contact with Rachel again. Carrie and Cathy Starr cooked two pots of spaghetti for supper. Mr. Starr's gaze remained unfocused while they ate – so did Rachel's. John did say, "Much obliged to y'all," as everyone was leaving the table. Quentin was disappointed to the point of tears when he watched Rachel walk away and then disappear behind the stairwell without saying goodbye. He imagined her going upstairs to share her dreams with that evil doll and balled his hands into fists. Quentin readied himself to storm out of the house as soon as they said their goodbyes in the foyer. He covered before Mrs. Starr's soul-searching gaze, feeling exposed as they shook hands. He quickly turned away, hiding his misty eyes.

That's when he heard, "Hey, Quentin!"

He turned to see a face appear over the banister, her smile barely visible through a mass of red hair.

"Later, alligator!" she said.

His heart leaped as he said, "After a while, crocodile."

Cathy Starr smiled, winked, and ruffled Quentin's hair.

The Kirlans walked out under a twilight sky of diffused pink.

“How did those two get together?” Carrie asked quietly.

Quentin overheard and replied, “He rescued her from some dude named Pimp.”

Carrie mouthed the word *whoa*, as the couple gaped at each other.

“Escaping a sordid past,” Kevin said.

“Escaping predators,” Carrie replied.

“We have one of the lowest crime rates in the U.S., thanks to Bill Baylor, the Horseshoe Mountains, and our sparse population,” Kevin said.

The Kirlans gazed dreamily at the majestic snowcapped mountains surrounding Brightwater on three sides, leaving only Baylor Road to the east as the entrance (guarded by armed guards). The Kirlans, who had been living here for four generations, thought of it as a sanctuary. They were pleased that the new teachers, John Bain, and two others, had credentials to teach seniors in high school. Quentin had walked ahead but stopped on the back porch wondering if he should tell his parents about the strange vision they had seen today – a glittering light and a flat black disk.

*Vision? How did I come up with that word?*

He wanted their input, so he told them.

They answered with stammering, grunts, exasperated sighs, and gaping eyes.

“What does it mean?” Carrie finally managed to ask anxiously.

“Not sure. But we’ll get Henry, the pastor, and the monks to weigh in on it.”

“Yeah but tell them to keep it a secret. Bill Baylor might fire you if we turn this place into another Fatima or a Roswell,” Carrie said.

“Oh yeah, we don’t want these two part of anything like that.”

“I hope it’s not a warning of some type of special trial we’ll all have to endure,” Carrie said.

“We all have trials, but we are more than conquerors through Christ.”

“Well said.”

“Henry’s not afraid of the devil,” Quentin said.

“Henry can be insightful at times,” Carrie said.

“Yeah, when he’s not acting like Santa Claus he reminds me of a Christian Sherlock Holmes – like he perceives things that others can’t,” Kevin said.

“Well, Quentin, you can talk to Henry about it tomorrow,” Carrie said.

Quentin smiled, always happy to talk to Henry.

Rachel showered, walked into her new bedroom, and gasped when she looked out her big bay window. There were trees everywhere, towering in their vast blackness like giant imposing sentinels, against a starry sky. She was about to close the curtain when she saw a light on upstairs at Quentin’s house. She focused on what appeared to be a silhouette standing in the middle of that window and tried a wave. It waved back.

*Quentin.*

No wonder her parents hadn’t told her much. They were moving to an isolated but beautiful, enchanted forest. Instead of going to a class with forty kids, the possibility existed for them to be the only two in the same room - ten kids in the entire school! *Why did Mom and Dad move into a gigantic forest?*

Maybe someday she would understand.

Quentin remained at the window.

*Why?* She wondered wearily.

Quentin could see that she was wearing pink shorty pajamas through his toy telescope. He could see the south end of her bedroom with the curtain drawn, which meant that he might catch her naked some night.

He wanted to see the difference...down there – the missing piece of the puzzle. Without the toy telescope she would simply be a shadow figure. With it he could make out a distorted form but that wasn't good enough. He decided to borrow his dad's binoculars on the weekend, which should enable him to see clearly. He dropped his telescope when Cathy Starr appeared in the window.

Cathy Starr stopped, surprised to see her daughter standing and waving before her big bay window. Fear gripped her heart as she imagined a Daddy Jones-type sniper out in those dark woods. *Why in the world did we give her this room?* Then she remembered: Because it had its own bathroom, which meant that Rachel didn't have to roam the halls at night walking to the second-story bathroom. The Lees had apparently used the second story for their bedrooms.

Bill Baylor told them the area and all the three-story cabins were beautiful. She didn't know they made three-story cabins. She prayed in her heart once again as she walked toward the window that the day would come when she would receive news from her private detective that Daddy Jones had been brought to justice.

She stood beside Rachel, looked out, and saw the small silhouette of a child walk away from a window that faced theirs. *My God, with the shades open and a pair of binoculars Quentin could watch her walking around in this room!* She impulsively reached up to close the curtains and stopped. *God*, she wanted Rachel to live in Brightwater! Rachel was all she had! They loved each other – the only pure, true love with another human being she had ever known!

Was she being selfish, wanting Rachel for herself?

She wanted to protect her from an outside world that sometimes-loved children like a lion loves its prey!

She determined right then to do her best to keep Rachel in Brightwater even if it meant not worrying about these curtains at times. She attributed any spying by Quentin at this age to curiosity.

“Well, what do you think of Brightwater?” Cathy asked.

Rachel responded with tears. “Okay, but I think I’m experiencing culture shock.”

“Child, you amaze me speaking words like that. Rindy Baylor wants to visit you tomorrow to help you get over it. Her father is one of the richest men in the world with investments in just about everything that’s making money.”

“I hope she likes me.”

“You have so much charm, my darling daughter. All you have to do is smile.”

“Like I do with Dad?”

*Dad again.* Cathy’s blue eyes blazed. Maybe someday she would dump the bum! She had survived a background just as bad as or worse than his yet loved to give and receive demonstrative affection.

*Another miracle.*

If only John would come in and kiss his daughter good night instead of reading those westerns. How could she explain to her daughter that post-traumatic stress and God’s law kept her bonded to him? He was her bodyguard.

She had to settle for sex in place of love. That was another reason she kept target practicing with that gun: it turned him on.

“Keep praying for him, Rachel, so that he’ll learn by watching me to tell you he loves you someday.”

“Okay,” she whimpered.

Quentin could actually see the left side of the bed with his telescope. Cathy kissed Rachel, turned out the light, and left the room without pulling the curtain. Rachel used a night light like him. She turned to the left side of her bed, but her image was blurred. Yet he noticed a strange movement – a convulsing. A few minutes later it hit him; it was the convulsing shudders of a person crying.

He vowed to do his best to keep her cheerful.

## Chapter Two

Rachel awoke and gasped, wondering where she was. *Why was it so quiet?* She looked out the big window upon a bright, sunshiny day and... *Quentin*, that boy in the other window, his name was Quentin, and she *had* moved into a forest – it wasn't a dream. She impulsively leaped out of bed to draw the curtain, fearful of another UFO appearing. She stopped halfway, blinking, wondering why Quentin wanted to watch her from that window. He waved. She waved back and smiled, thinking he just wanted to say good morning. A pinpoint of light drew her attention toward the thicket just behind the swing. She swore she saw someone wearing glasses leap behind a tree – someone who had been watching her. The dogs were going crazy too. A few tense minutes later, somebody walked out of the woods toward Quentin's house attempting, Rachel thought, to appear nonchalant. He was a big kid with dark hair, crazy blue eyes, and glasses with thick lenses that reflected sunlight from a gold frame.

*Who is that?* He looked like a nut heading toward Quentin's back porch. She figured she'd better tell her mother.

Carrie Kirlan reached for the snub-nose .38 when she saw through the back window the reason the dogs were losin' it. The guy looked like a big goofy kid. She recalled that the Huber family had moved into the east side of Brightwater, with their twelve-year-old son, only yesterday. Surely this must be him. He knocked on the back door. She slipped the .38 behind her waistband at her lower back and went to answer.

"Does uhm...Quentin Kirlan live here?"

They stood eye to eye, which put him at five foot four and a half inches tall. He reminded her of Rachel's little granny baby doll with those crazy eyes. *He must be mentally handicapped.* He was wearing blue jean coveralls with a white T-shirt.

"Yes."



“I’m your new neighbor, Ray Huber. I wondered if Quentin wanted to play some basketball.”

*With a giant?*

Quentin heard his mother informing him he had a visitor. He had been wondering what all the ruckus was about with the dogs. He slipped on a pair of jean shorts with a burgundy pullover and headed downstairs to find out.

Crazy blue eyes gawked at him from behind glasses that appeared as thick as the bottom of a Coke bottle. He gaped at the size of him filling the doorway. If this kid wanted to play, how was he supposed to play with a kid twice his size?

“He wants to know if you want to play some basketball.”

“Okay, meet you at the court.”

“The door closed, and Quentin asked his mother, “Is he retarded...I mean slow?”

“I don’t know. He’s your other new neighbor. He says he’s in the fifth grade.”

“He looks like a seventh-grader.”

“Maybe he’ll be goofy enough for you to have some fun with.” Carrie grimaced, not liking the way that came out.

“Yeah, maybe,” Quentin said incredulously.

He got the basketball out of his toy box, bowed his head, and suddenly had to support himself with his hand against the wall. He felt sad, empty, missing having a good friend like Jimmy again. Quentin closed the toy box and sat upon it. He thought of Henry Jacobs, who was content with living alone. He couldn’t imagine himself doing that. He couldn’t imagine himself as an adult living without a friend even if it was a girl.

Most kids didn't think about Jesus as much as he did. Henry Jacobs, his parents, and the monks were responsible for that. Plus, he and Rachel were marked. They had seen a vision, something they would never forget.

*Why?*

He still needed to ask Henry.

He remembered Rachel smiling at him, saying goodbye last night, and his heart was aglow as he walked out to meet his new friend.

He bounced the ball to him and Ray made a descent layup.

The dogs roared and lunged savagely toward the fence when Ray ran toward the hoop and continued until Quentin gave them the friendship sign.

“Whadaya got them man eaters for?”

“That’s Guardy and Lucy, my watchdogs.”

“You afraid of the bogeyman?”

“Bogeyman appeared to us just yesterday over yonder by those treetops. We saw a black circle I believe was the devil.”

“He’s after you.”

“He’s after everybody.”

“You might *be* a little devil.”

*Sounded like a joker.* Quentin took a shot but missed.

“You need some practice.”

Quentin tried another shot, but Ray snuffed him and drove to the basket for another lay-in.

“Wow, that was really something—snuffin’ me, big boy.”

“You’re one of those slow, mentally handicapped kids.”

*Yeah, and you just look like one.* The guy was turning out to be just as goofy as he looked. Quentin didn't know if he liked his abrasive sense of humor.

Quentin thought he heard voices...the voices of little girls. He looked over to Rachel's backyard and Raymond followed his gaze.

"Who lives over there?"

"A little girl. Sounds like there's more than one over there today."

"She pretty?"

"Yeah, but that don't matter to me much."

"Let's spy on them."

Quentin *was* curious as to how Rachel would react around one of the brats.

"Okay, follow me."

It was Saturday and his father was grocery shopping, so he wanted to do this quick. Some of the longtime rangers in Brightwater got weekends off, so maybe that was how the girls got here today – if indeed it was one or two of the terrible trio, if not Rindy herself.

Raymond followed Quentin across the field unaware that Cathy Starr was scanning the woods from the third-floor window like a sentry, with her ACP 1911 double-barreled pistol nearby. She didn't like the looks of the gangly creep with the thick glasses. However, he was no Daddy Jones.

"We can peek through the branches right here."

Quentin couldn't believe it; it was Rindy, Rindy getting her claws in her already. They were dressed in ankle-length gowns, one black, with Rindy wearing blue. They were sitting at a small round table on the back porch with three chairs, sipping from cups with their pinky fingers extended.

“You are a girl with class! You deserve to be in a café like this. Oh, here’s our waiter,” Rindy said, speaking with an accent that Quentin hated to admit sounded classy.

“They’re both pretty but the redhead is beautiful!” Ray whispered excitedly.

Quentin frowned. “She’s six years old!”

“She won’t be six forever.”

“How old are you?”

“Ten.”

“You look twelve or thirteen.” *You must have flunked two or three years*, he thought.

Rindy *was* pretty with her bouffant blond hair and blue eyes; but her nose was too long to make the 10 category where he placed Rachel and Gemma Jenkins.

He watched them pretend they were dining in a ritzy café, where Rindy introduced her to a succession of famous people they pretended were sitting in that third chair. Some names were familiar, and Quentin believed Rindy had actually met them. Rachel was awestruck.

They finished breakfast and dabbed their lips with a red linen napkin in a prissy way.

“Now we dance,” Rindy said.

Rindy pressed a button on a tape player and started dancing to rock and roll. Rachel was surprisingly adept at following her. They danced in gold and silver slippers.

Folks didn’t do much dancing out in these parts, but Rachel and Rindy were enjoying themselves like a couple of city girls.

The next song was a violin slow type, but they enjoyed that one too, dancing elegantly and giggling. It ended and Rindy turned her

head in the direction of his house in response to the dog's savage rasping.

“Quentin Kirlan is a bum and a no-account. I believe that's what he'll be when he grows up.”

Ray Huber wheezed and guffawed himself breathless.

*That kind of crude humor is right up your alley, huh, buddy?*

“Why?”

“Don't let him fool you. He burps, rips, and makes faces at little girls. He scorches off in class, gets C's, and has no intention of bettering himself. He has a sloppy desk and homework papers that put him in the slob category.”

Quentin bristled. Rindy made no mention that she ruled a brainwashed clique where only certain people were worthy of her royal highness. She was ruthlessly ambitious to be teacher's pet and sneered with disdain upon all who were not like her – in short, a bully and a girl who too often didn't want to let her hair down and be a fun-loving little kid to every kid.

“He says you're a stuck-up snob and a bully,” Rachel replied to Rindy.

“I don't burp, rip, and make ugly faces at little girls and crack their pencils. I don't act like an immature brat in front of my teacher. I make the most of my time to be a productive human being instead of wasting it on nonsense. You listen to me, and your dreams will come true. My dad is a dream – come – a - truer. Hang with Quentin and you'll be a nobody.”

“Does that sound like a little girl talking?” Quentin asked.

“She thinks you're a dumb bunny.”

“Quentin is a friend, but he won't stand in the way of my dreams,” Rachel said.

“Which are?”

“To be a singer and a movie star.”

“We can do it. My dad has a pocket full of miracles. Don’t let Quentin drag you down to his level.”

Rachel scratched her head with a perplexed look.

“Do you hate Quentin?” she asked.

“Why be like him when the world is ours!” Rindy said, holding Rachel’s hand with a visionary gleam in her eye that infuriated Quentin.

“What if Quentin becomes a rich man?”

“He won’t. He’ll be a poor bum who will live in Brightwater with a poor wife or be a hermit like Henry Jacobs. Do you want that?”

Rachel shook her head no, but with a look of dismay. She wondered about Rindy’s definition of poor. She hadn’t toured Brightwater yet, but she was surrounded here by beautiful homes and country. She gazed dreamy-eyed at a mist, tinted gold by the sun that gilded parts of the lush, rolling hills. Emerald green foliage covered sections of dense, verdant grass. Tree trunks were ink black, surrounded by patches of the gilded mist. Cathy Starr interrupted her reverie by inviting the girls in for peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

Rindy pimped her way into the house.

“We need to teach that smarty pants a lesson,” Ray said, pretending to be furious.

“Tried that. Didn’t work.”

“Maybe you should’ve been a gentleman!”

“Tried that too. Didn’t work.”

“Try this!” Ray pulled an oversized earthworm from the ground, ran toward the porch, and grabbed a handful of moist soil from a

flowerpot. He turned Rindy's teacup over and placed the worm beneath it. A book entitled *Cinderella* was leaning against the house beside Rachel's chair. Ray opened it and closed it upon that clump of black fertilizer. He placed the book on the table before Rachel's seat and leaped off the porch, living up to the way he looked – crazy.

Quentin hung his head over and shook it: "You don't know what you have done."

Rindy was a little wiser now that she was six, and she might turn in those who resisted her snobbishness to her father. And what of Rachel's new book? He wasn't going to take the fall for this shenanigan.

Ray wasn't scared as much as agitated.

Quentin wondered what to do. Perhaps it was time to be a snitch. He imagined himself going to the porch and just as he attempted to get rid of the worm, Rindy stepped out and caught him red-handed. She reacted with a shriek, yelling, "I told you. Look how he treats little girls!" Quentin couldn't picture Ray stepping up to take the blame; he pictured him running and hiding in the thicket. He could then play the role of a hero and turn Ray in. The big boy might try to tackle him en route to the porch if he tried to spill the beans now.

*Too late.* Rindy and Rachel had decided to finished eating outdoors, which thrilled Ray. Rindy held a small teapot.

*This was trouble.*

She sat down nonchalantly, and her expression slowly turned quizzical when she noticed the book, then the overturned cup. Rachel sat down and at the same time Rindy lifted the cup, Rachel opened the book. They both shrieked and recoiled at the same time, bolting for the door – where Mrs. Starr appeared – and Quentin swore he glimpsed a holstered gun at her waist. The big fat earthworm slithered over the table.

“Oh God, that psycho! See what I mean; the things he does! I’m telling his mother!”

Rindy threw off her slippers and slipped into white sneakers, tying them with violent tugs.

“I don’t believe Quentin did this,” Cathy Starr said.

“I do,” Rindy retorted, grabbing the book and leaping into a run. She ran up and down the tree line looking for the small opening everyone used. She found it and screamed with red-faced rage, “Quentin Kirlan, you brat, I’m telling your mother!” She bolted through the opening, but the back of her gown caught on some peg-like stubble and ripped halfway up the back. Quentin saw her pink panties and laughed himself breathless while hiding in the trees only a few feet away.

That didn’t stop Rindy. She ran with the two flaps of her gown fluttering in the wind, sometimes exposing her panties. Quentin noticed Raymond staggering toward the street, laughing so *hard he could barely run*. But run away he did, like a rat expecting him to take the rap.

*No way!* He ran after Rindy, who was pounding on the back door. He made it to the porch just as Rindy opened the book, displaying the mud pie with a poor-me demeanor to his mother.

“Rindy, you hypocrite, quit pretending you’re not a stuck-up witch! I didn’t do that to your book; Raymond Huber did. And how dare you call me a bum in front of my friend Rachel?”

“Did you call Quentin a bum, Rindy?” Carrie asked

“I did.”

“Why?”

“Him and Jimmy make faces at me, burp, and rip around me, and he’s a slob, a dummy, a jerk, and now this mud pie, and a giant worm!”

“How did you tear your gown?”



“He’s responsible for that too. He should pay for my gown and Rachel’s book.”

“Raymond did it! He made the mud pie, and I was too late to stop it.”

Quentin had to apologize for his bad manners. Rindy glared at him. He felt like a private gazing at a general – a familiar feeling around Rindy.

“Can’t you ever be nice?” He said to her back, actually wishing she had torn the front of her dress. She responded by thrusting her middle finger toward the sky. He looked up to see if that black circle was following her. *No, but evil and mischief had assaulted these woods.*

“Honestly, Quentin, burps and rips, cracked pencils, worms and mud.”

Quentin couldn’t suppress a snicker. Then the feeling of remorse returned.

“It won’t happen again.”

“Gotta ground ya!”

Quentin nodded. He wanted to spend some time with Mr. Jacobs but awaited his sentence.

“Play it safe. Always play it safe. That’s the first rule!”

“Yes, Mom.”

“Two days grounded. Now into the house!”

He ran upstairs and looked out the window. *What were the girls doing now?* Rindy was still trying to convince his only friend to turn against him. He gave the picture of Jesus an inquisitive glance. “How am I supposed to love goofs like Rindy and Raymond?” He wished the picture would start talking.

His father's big frame suddenly appeared in the doorway and Quentin gulped. *No belt, yet.*

Before he could speak Quentin said, "Dad, have you seen Raymond, our new neighbor?"

He shook his head with that distressed look that Quentin hated.

"One look at him and you'll know he did it. He's a goofball, and I feel sorry for his teacher. I hope he's not in my class."

"He's right," his mother said, entering the room. "He looks like a nut."

"The war with Rindy ends now," his dad said. "It's not the Christian thing to do. And we don't want to make enemies of Mr. Baylor, who employs most of the rangers in Brightwater." He shook his head with a sigh. "If it's not too late already!" He stormed out of the room.

"There was another boy with Quentin, and I believe he is responsible for what happened," Cathy said.

"I will find out about him," Rindy said, with an authoritative air.

"Ever see any UFOs in these woods?" Rachel asked.

"You mean the angel and the devil," Cathy said.

Rindy stood up, suddenly embarrassed as she remembered her torn gown. She angrily tugged at it, reshaping it to the contours of her body. Rindy composed herself and appeared to be pondering the incredible statement she had just heard.

"Angels," she said incredulously. "Demons in these woods. Hey, my dad says these preachers are making big bucks these days. They preach a God who wants us to be rich, Rachel. I can go for a God like that."

Cathy frowned. *God was just a bank to Rindy.* That reflected on her parents. She was the spoiled rich girl with a sense of entitlement.

Rachel shook her head wearily. She felt overwhelmed by it all, unable to understand.

*She experienced a lot of change yesterday,* Cathy thought, noticing her expression.

“What do we do around here?” Rachel asked.

“Rhiannon, Gemma, and I always find stuff to do. We have a helicopter in the yard, and a swimming pool in our cabin,” Rindy said proudly.

*How did Rachel become so privileged with Rindy?* Cathy wondered. Her daughter was beautiful with an endearing smile. Her cousin referred to Rachel as a future supermodel. *That was no doubt the reason.* Rindy was fairly attractive too, with blond hair, blue eyes, and a slightly aquiline nose.

“Well, we better get out of these clothes – clothes we’ll be wearing someday,” Rindy said.

*The nerve of this girl,* Cathy thought, *giving no consideration to what I might want. What if you knew my background, little girl, as a hooker and a drug addict? Would that make a difference?*

*I want my daughter to stay here, in the sheltering arms of Brightwater – in the sheltering arms of God.* She gazed dreamily at the snowcapped mountains and the forest of aspen, spruce, and maple that blazed with virgin intensity.

Rindy beckoned with her finger for Rachel to follow her inside.

*Try as you might, little girl, I’m steering my child in a different direction,* Cathy thought.

Rindy dressed Rachel in one expensive outfit after another, with jewelry, before her vanity. Rachel donned one outfit consisting of a white skirt speckled with black, stylish boots, and a vest with a hat,

and wondered how her father would react if she posed for him. She never tried that before. He was off today sitting in his chair in his bedroom reading. Rindy placed an expensive gold necklace around her neck and clipped glittering silver earrings to her ears.

“I’ll be right back,” Rachel said, and ran down to the second floor.

She stood in the doorway of his bedroom smiling, until he looked up.

“How do I look, Dad?”

“I’m going to flush you down the toilet headfirst if you don’t take that off!”

His glaring eyes frightened her, and she ran back to Rindy. She stood before her, head bowed, crestfallen.

“He shamed me. Yes, that’s the word. He tried to shame me.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

She was sick of him, sick of his coldness, his controlling spirit. She was pacing toward her window and back to Rindy; but in her mind she stood before an adoring crowd applauding her performance. She wanted to defy him, to wear lots of pretty dresses, to have money, fame. People told her she could sing and act. Even Quentin was impressed by her performance. If John didn’t want to tell her he loved her, then she hoped millions of fans would surround the world. She wanted love, not shame, and to make something of herself, not live under someone’s heel. She told Rindy so.

“Great, my dad and I will help you in any way we can.”

“How rich are you?” Rachel asked.

“We’re billionaires,” she said with a smirk.

“Why does your dad live in the woods?”

“We own the Baylor restaurant chain, but we make a lot of money here too. Some people owe us for land, rent-a-cabins, property, and tourism. My parents like the beauty and the privacy.”

“Do you like it?” Rachel asked.

“I like it except for having to deal with the bums like Quentin and Jimmy Lee.”

She didn’t share Rindy’s view of Quentin being a bum – yet.

Quentin sat on his bed searching his Living Bible, hoping to understand Rindy’s evil. He peered over the top of his book several times at the picture of Jesus because he felt on the verge of understanding something.

He saw a light shining in the darkness and walked toward it, suddenly astonished at the size of his body. *I must be over six feet tall...wearing a long duster, a cowboy hat, boots with spurs, and a gun...like Drifter!* He opened his coat, making the gun visible. The closer he got to the light, the more he could make out the dark shapes of buildings. He saw monstrous faces like gargoyles with yellow eyes glaring at him from the sky.

A horse-driven carriage suddenly appeared at the edge of the light and stopped. He heard a loud crack followed by an explosion of pain at his neck. His two guns suddenly appeared in his hands.

“Hold it right there!” he said.

“Get out of my way, white trash!”

He heard a woman’s voice. He kept both guns pointed at her as the carriage moved closer. He found himself gaping at a grown-up version of Rindy Baylor wearing a black duster. He noticed glittering diamonds outlining her carriage.

“You put that whip down now, woman!”

A gun suddenly appeared in her hand. “I don’t take kindly to bums being in my way.”

He slowly holstered the gun in his left hand. He leaped at her, pushing her pistol away just as the gun exploded. The black horse panicked and leaped into a gallop, slamming Rindy against the back of the carriage. He ran and a bullet whizzed by his ear as he leaped through the saloon doors. The saloon was empty except for a bartender standing behind the bar with a calm smile.

“The woman out there, she tried to kill me for no reason!”

The bartender calmly poured him a drink. Quentin gasped, realizing it was Jesus.

“She might come hunting me!”

Quentin-Drifter ran and hid behind the edge of the bar. His heart hammered while aiming his gun at the entrance.

“You aim to shoot that girl?” Jesus asked.

“I’ll shoot her in self-defense if I have to.”

“You’ll be gunnin’ down the wrong hombre.”

“What? The woman tried to shoot me! She hates me because I’m not filthy rich!”

“The devil hates you; that’s your enemy, son.”

“The de...” Quentin-Drifter looked up at Jesus. He was wearing rustic, black pants, a light blue shirt with long sleeves, with a small Bible underneath a gun belt where a holster should be.

“Aren’t you scared she might run in here with two guns blazing?”

“The devil knows better than to mess with me.”

“You’re sayin’ it’s the devil makin’ Rindy do that.”

“Mostly. Only she don’t know it.”

“That’s them ugly hombres I seen in the sky.”

Jesus took a sip of something red. “That’s right.”

The understanding that Quentin-Drifter had been searching for suddenly hit him.

“You’re telling me if I hate Rindy, I hate the wrong person.”

“That’s right.”

“Whew! How do we get rid of this outlaw?”

Rindy suddenly appeared in the room with her gun pointed at his head. She must have snuck in through a rear entrance. Jesus whipped His Bible out and pointed it at her. He read a scripture verse, then her eyes bulged and she screamed. Quentin-Drifter gaped with astonishment as she ran out through the doors.

“The devil’s afraid of a book?”

“He’s afraid of me and what’s in this book. You get rid of him by speaking this book out loud to him and doing what it says.”

“How do I pray?”

“Don’t ever pretend; just be honest. Base your prayers on what’s in this book.”

“Mr. Jacobs likes the fun part. He told me once he likes to get drunk on your new wine.”

Jesus smiled. “Have a drink, pard.”

## Chapter Three

Quentin threw the basketball down, huffing out a sigh of futility. “They are not going to play with us, Tommy! I told you; Gemma Jenkins is too stuck up!”

Tommy was Quentin’s age and height, with blond hair blue eyes, and a straight nose. They took turns visiting each other throughout the years. Tom lived in Ann Arbor and gave Quentin a taste of the city life and vice versa. Now six, he was able to visit Quentin himself. They always got along, and Quentin considered his cousin a real friend.

“You got stuck-up girls out in these boonies?”

“Can you believe it? It’s because of a rich snob named Rindy who brainwashed ’em.”

Tom watched the girls chasing each other, giggling in the yard, admiring the beauty of their long, shimmering, windblown hair.

“You got some beautiful girls out here.”

“You care about that stuff?”

“Never used to until I got a crush on my first-grade teacher.”

Quentin remembered being dazzled by Rachel’s beauty; but that was as far as it went.

“Is the redhead stuck up too?”

“I hope not. She’s all I got.”

The boys quietly resumed shooting hoops for a while, when Quentin turned and gaped with astonishment at Rachel running toward them with a smile. She was wearing white tennis shoes with matching shorts and a red pullover. Sweat glistened on her face. He snickered while noticing his cousin Tom’s spellbound expression.

“Hide me, Quentin, we are playing hide-and-go-seek.”



He laughed. *Atta girl, now you're thinking fun like a kid.* It would be interesting to watch Gemma Jenkins forced to approach them looking for Rachel.

"I got a great idea. You should switch clothes with Tommy. Put on his hat, shades, and shoes. Hide your hair under the hat. I bet she won't recognize you," Quentin said.

Rachel mouthed the word *What?* and blinked in surprise. "Where can we change?"

"Come on, I'll show you." Quentin wanted to be there to get his peek. He could kill two birds with one stone.

"We got five minutes," Rachel said, with a slightly apprehensive look on her face. Quentin rushed them to the edge of the thicket before she changed her mind.

"Hide behind these two trees and change. I'll stand in the middle and hand you two the clothes."

When she handed him her shorts, Quentin pushed down on a branch and got a flash peek through her white undies just before she turned around.

*Okay, okay, I get part of the picture. The rest will come later.*

"Tom, you stay in the woods. Rachel and I will shoot some hoops."

They did, and Gemma appeared a few minutes later running parallel with the thicket. She glanced at them and kept on running. A few minutes later she appeared again; glanced again; and kept on running.

*I love this,* Quentin thought. *This is the way life should be.* He could tell from Rachel's belly laughs that she was enjoying it too. Gemma appeared again, walking this time. She saw Rachel's sloppy, uncoordinated shot but kept on walking. The next time she appeared, she was walking *toward* them. She reminded Quentin of *The Thing* with her stalker-like approach like in the old James Arness movie, and

he actually shuddered for a second. Gemma's walk slowed, and she crossed her arms over her chest, cautiously approaching with open-mouthed astonishment. She was noticing the bulge of red hair behind Rachel's hat. She leaned against the basketball pole with her hand on her hip. Rachel smiled, took the hat off, and bowed. Gemma applauded. Quentin also took a bow because it was his idea. Tom ran out of the woods and split Rachel's pants up the rear.

"Oops!" he said, with a shy smile.

They all snickered and giggled. Tom walked backwards all the way to Quentin's basement while the children giggled.

"Wanna shoot some hoops?" Quentin asked Gemma.

"Nah!" she said in a way that caused him to suddenly want to throw the ball at her. He couldn't believe her sudden mood change. *You were having fun, dummy!*

"Why not?" he asked coolly.

"I wanna do something else, just Rachel and me. Come on, Rachel, let's go," she said, as though afraid of something.

Rachel handed him the glasses and the hat and walked away, blinking in surprise.

Quentin couldn't believe it! He slid down to the ground with his back against the basketball pole, utterly dumfounded.

"We're just kids!" he whined, almost in tears. "Kids just want to play and have fun! How did we get kids like these out here, in the middle of nowhere?" We're supposed to be hicks!" He saw his cousin Tom approaching, holding the torn shorts. Quentin stood up and slammed the ball onto the concrete driveway. Dadburnit, he wanted to fix their hides again – to teach them a lesson! He wanted to get in Gemma's face and ask, *What makes you better than me?*

"Where did the girls go?" Tom asked

"I told you – Gemma Jenkins refused to play with us."

Tom scratched his head with a puzzled expression.

“You got girls like that back in Ann Arbor?”

He thought a moment and then shrugged. “No, never gave something like that much thought. You say Rindy Baylor made ’em that way?”

He was about to say yes when the thought *wrong hombre* hit him. *My gawd, the dream!* He remembered the dream.

“The devil made them that way.”

“The devil? Never gave him much thought either.”

“He’s running wild out here for some reason.”

Tom looked around at all the beauty with a quizzical expression. “I thought he hung around in spooky, dark places.”

“I wish he would get out of here! Wait a second, that’s it! We need to get rid of him!”

“How? I’m Catholic, but I can’t remember what my catechism said to do.”

“It’s got something to do with the Bible. You read the Bible to the devil – I think.”

“I don’t get it. This sounds freaky. Where? When?”

“Mr. Jacobs said to pray. So, I guess it’s prayin’ and readin’ the Bible. And I want to see some results.”

“So?”

“So, we spy on ’em. Stay hidden while we clobber the devil and watch what happens.”

Tom seemed excited. “Think she’ll become nice?”

“You mean mushy?”

“Yeah,” he said dreamy-eyed. “But what if they go inside?”

They both turned to see them on the run again, chasing each other.

“They’re playing cooties. Man, I wish we could play with ’em!” Tom said.

“Wait here; I’ll go get the Bible!”

Tom laughed at the incredible, beautiful silliness of the thing. He was still laughing when Quentin returned with his black Bible commanding the dogs to shut up. They planned on sneaking through the thicket without them. Tom continued laughing all the way to the edge of Rachel’s yard, where they dropped down to peep out from under the trees. The girls were playing hopscotch on that little slab of sidewalk between the porch steps and the driveway.

“She still has my baggy black shorts on. They look like a skirt. She’s floating in my gray army T-shirt,” Tom said wincing.

Quentin prayed that Cathy wouldn’t spot those baggy clothes. He couldn’t suppress a giggle as he prayed for a miracle. He decided to do this devil thing by imitating his preacher. He aimed the Bible at Gemma with the book open and began to read.

“O Lord, hear my praying, listen to my plea, O God my King, for I will never pray to anyone but You.”

Quentin read it slowly, but he understood every word. His parents were right; this Bible was easier to understand. Quentin asked God to deliver Rindy and Gemma from the devil who controlled them.

“Will he zap her? When will it happen?” Tom asked.

“Don’t know. We might have to wait a while.”

“Shucks! Use it like a machine gun.”

*Yeah, use it like a gun, like Jesus did.* He pointed it and made rapid-fire sounds with his mouth. A thought came from the back of his mind. *This thing was a sword.* He lunged forward with a thrust, tripped over

Tom's head, and fell out of the brush. He landed hard on his belly, losing his wind, the Bible landing a few feet in front of him. He couldn't move.

"What is he doing? Why is he lying there? What's that in front of him?" Gemma demanded.

Gemma stomped toward him while Rachel followed. Tom gazed dreamily at the approach of the chestnut-haired, blue-eyed beauty. Quentin sat up and felt relieved.

"What are you doing here...with a Bible?" Gemma asked.

"I'm trying to run off the devil. He makes people mean and stuck up."

Gemma made a sour face that slowly changed into an aha expression.

"You callin' me a devil?"

Quentin bristled. "It says here in this Bible that it's the devil that turns people into creeps!"

Gemma stomped toward the house. *She was going to squeal.* Tom pounded the earth in frustration.

"The devil's doin' this, Rachel," Quentin said.

She responded by holding herself with a shudder. *Dang that fallin' out of the brush!*

"Mrs. Starr, could you come here, please?" Gemma said.

Cathy stopped ironing while listening to the tone of the girl's voice. *Angry*, she decided. That was better than terrified.

She walked out and looked up to see Quentin talking to Rachel at the edge of the tree line while holding a big book.

"Quentin called me a devil! He's got nothing better to do than spy on us and preach to me from the Bible."

“That’s a Bible?!”

Gemma nodded pitifully.

*Oh brother!* Cathy dropped her gaze and shook her head. She certainly believed in the devil. How else could one explain the horrendous evil on this planet? She glared at Gemma, wondering if she was another Rindy.

“Why did he call you a devil?”

“He’s ignorant! He’s a degenerate,” Gemma said, proud that she could remember the word.

Cathy was dumbfounded that a little girl could say that about such a beautiful young boy. His dark hair, fine features, and deep lips made him extraordinarily handsome. *How am I supposed to oversee this?* she wondered. *Do I want my child associating with girls like this? And what if you girls find out that I came from a dysfunctional family in the Columbus ghetto? That I was a victim of child abuse, which led me to drug addiction, alcoholism, and prostitution? Well, I don’t care if you ever come around. I don’t want my little girl thinking that certain people are better than others. That Bible says we are all sinners. That’s what I’m going to teach my little girl.*

Something caused Cathy to give Rachel a double take. She gaped at Rachel’s baggy shorts and the extra-large army pullover. “Rachel, come here! Where did you get those clothes?” she asked, as three children approached her. One had been hiding in the thicket. Rachel explained what had happened. Tom handed her Rachel’s torn pants.

“Okay, okay,” Cathy whimpered, her heart pounding.

The children had thrust upon her the role of a judge. She even pictured herself in the black garb.

“Gemma, do you want to play with Quentin?” Cathy asked.

“He’s a slob! I will not play with a boy who burps and rips in front of little girls.”

“I’m sorry, Gemma. Rindy made me that way. It won’t happen again.” Quentin then added with a wry expression, “Tom’s got a crush on you.”

Tom blushed.

Cathy noticed Gemma lost in thought with a visionary gleam in her eyes. She believed right then that rich Rindy controlled this girl. *Rindy was a controller.*

“Don’t care to play with him,” Gemma said, with a drooping mouth.

Quentin doubled over, feeling like life was being sucked out of the area, creating a weird dead zone.

“That’s the devil making you think that way, Gemma!” Quentin said.

“Is not! You’re the one with the devil! You’ll be a poor bum all your life.”

“How do you know? You’re Rindy’s puppet, you dummy!”

*You got that right,* Cathy thought.

Gemma turned her back to them and crossed her arms.

Quentin looked at Cathy. “Do you believe the nutty girls we got out here, Mrs. Starr? This is the beautiful boonies where we got little girls running around filled with demons!”

At that, Quentin departed.

*Quentin could really get in trouble with Gemma’s parents using such inflammatory rhetoric,* Cathy thought. She was glad to see him turn and slowly walk away, shaking his head. Gemma turned and asked Rachel to resume playing hopscotch as if nothing had happened.

Cathy hoped Gemma was just immature. She understood why Quentin was tempted to harass them. She closed her eyes and sadly

shook her head. *You girls don't know what evil is.* She recalled the vision of the black orb the children had seen. *Deliver us from evil, oh God! It dominated so much of my life. Don't let it get us anymore.*

Quentin returned an hour later leading a bald, bespectacled man, wearing a blue track suit and a white T-shirt. He was tall, thin, with sky-blue eyes and a bright smile.

“This is our teacher, Mrs. Starr, Brother John Bain. He was out taking a walk in front of the house, and I thought you might like to meet him.”

“Yes, I would. Thank you, Quentin.” They shook hands and introduced themselves.

“What kind of priest are you? What order?”

“Jesuit. I'm also a teacher with a degree.”

“How wonderful! Will you teach them about Jesus?”

“That's your decision.”

“Please do. And tell me, how do you pray?”

“It's quite simple for me. I simply remind myself I'm always in the presence of God as often as I can.”

“How brilliant and simple indeed! I never thought of it before. I believe God sent you to answer my question.”

Two beautiful little girls were gaping at him, so Quentin introduced him.

“Our teacher,” Quentin said to Rachel.

Rachel's brow furrowed. “Sure is going to be a small class,” she said.



Quentin shook his head. The reality of the lonely situation was hitting her again. He wished Gemma could go to school with them. She might gradually change, free from Rindy. He noticed Tom kept looking at the ground – *trying to hide tears*, he realized. *Gee, the kid really had it bad for Gemma.* Quentin scowled at her. Their eyes met. *Come on*, he mouthed. She stuck her tongue out at him. Both adults noticed her ignorance and Quentin smiled sardonically.

*The closer one got, the better this woman looked*, John Bain thought with a gulp. Both of his neighbor women were beautiful. He hoped he wouldn't have trouble sleeping tonight, but he feared the worst.

“Great! Cathy arose and shook his hand, conscious of how her thick red hair fell over half of her face. “See you later, Brother,” she said, running from her feelings.

John Bain breathed a sigh of relief after the woman closed the door. He walked back toward the road, noticing Quentin by his side.

“See the girl over yonder with the dark brown hair?” Quentin asked.

“Yes,” he said with a short laugh.

“Gotta pray for her, and we need some big guns. She's being controlled by a stuck-up demon that controls Rindy Baylor. Have you met the Baylors?”

“Yes.”

“What's your impression of them?”

“They have an air of self-importance. But Bob's cousins, the twins at the monastery, are humble people.”

“Y' all pray for Gemma Jenkins. She got a snob spirit.”

“It's nice to meet a man so young who thinks about faith.”

“Never used to.” Quentin explained his vision, the influence of Mr. Jacobs, and the dream. Quentin noticed John Bain looking at him with wide-eyed astonishment.

“Quentin, I saw the vision too.”

“What does it mean?”

“Not sure yet. To pray no doubt. Maybe someday we’ll know.”

“Well, it got my attention. Got me thinking about Jesus.”

“Visions usually change people for the better. I’m thinking of Paul the apostle,” he said with a smile.

“Would you please pray for Gemma now?” Quentin asked. He planned to ask Mr. Jacobs too, if need be, still hoping for that quick deliverance.

Quentin kept watching him, walking beside him, until it hit John Bain that Quentin had said *now*. He stopped, whispered a prayer, with his hands folded.

“Could I hear it out loud, please?”

“Uh...okay. Uh...Lord fill Gemma with your love and joy and deliver her from evil.”

“Thanks, bro,” Quentin said, returning back to what he considered the crime scene.

Tom stood there, admiring Gemma with rapturous wonder while Quentin shook his head. He wanted to play with the girls but realized he wouldn’t be broken-hearted because they said no. He extended his arms and twirled around, laughing from pure joy because he was one free little kid. He started skipping, beckoning for Tom to follow, and intended to skip all the way home. Halfway there, he turned to his right and saw a sight he would never forget. Gemma and Rachel were giggling and skipping beside him. *Keep skipping, Quentin*, he thought, a miracle is taking place. And indeed, a miracle took place that day. The girls played soccer, baseball, and explorer, and they built forts

with sticks. Gemma even allowed Tom to push her on a swing. Everything took on an ethereal quality, and Quentin played as though in a rapturous dream. They were just kids, doing what comes naturally to kids, playing their hearts out.

Twilight found them lying on their backs facing a fire in the sky.

“Gemma, Rachel, time to come home,” Cathy called from Rachel’s bedroom window.

“Yes, Mum, we’ll be along in a minute.”

Gemma agreed to let Tom walk her home. Rachel stayed beside Quentin, so the two of them could walk together.

“It’s a miracle!” Quentin said to Rachel, lying beside him. “Gemma changed, Rachel!” he said excitedly.

“We both want to be movie stars when we grow up.” She paused, looking at Quentin.

“So?”

“I told her movie stars have to be very good at pretending.”

“So?”

“I told her we needed to practice pretending now, so we could get really good. I challenged her to pretend she was Tom’s friend. I told her it would be fun, and it would be like an acting lesson.”

“She’s pretending?”

“I don’t know. But I think she had fun.”

Gemma and Tom had walked to the edge of the tree line. Quentin strained his eyes in the ashen light to gape at what looked like a kiss. *Yuk*. He couldn’t believe it! *Wow!*

“I hope she stays that way, Rachel.”

“Me too.”

“Come on, I’ll walk you home.”

Quentin wondered who to thank as they walked now in the darkness – her or God. They walked quietly, all the way to the porch, where Tom was waiting where Quentin was surprised to realize that he had without knowing it, placed his hand Rachel’s shoulder.

“Good night, Rachel,” he said softly.

“Night, guys.”

The halogen lights blinked on as Quentin and Tom walked away.

“You should have kissed or hugged her. Bet you could have got one.”

“Don’t want one.”

“Betcha will someday.”

“Hope not.”

Gemma laughed when Rachel entered, and the tone of her voice shocked her. She laughed like she had just put one over on a fool, Cathy thought, while walking down the stairs. Rachel had expected a fun-loving laugh, like she had heard throughout the day. Gemma stood with hands on hips, snickering with an incredulous expression that said, *I can’t believe that was so easy. She had enjoyed her adulation*, Cathy thought, watching her from the edge of the living room. “Do you really like Tommy?” Rachel asked.

“I liked his attention.”

“But do you like Tommy?”

Gemma thought, groping for the right words. “He flattered my ego!” she said, surprised at her own thought, which hit her as a revelation. “I guess I enjoyed that the most.”

Cathy’s brow furrowed. *I thought girls weren’t supposed to think that way at least until they were teens.*

“Do you like Quentin?” Gemma asked, with a let’s see what *you* have to say attitude.

“Yeah, Quentin likes to have fun.”

Cathy smiled, proud of her daughter’s response. Gemma smiled too, sardonically, Cathy thought.

The four played together for the rest of the week. Cathy watched them from the windows. She could discern the evil thrill of manipulative power in Gemma’s demeanor. She prayed for the girls of Brightwater Bay to be delivered from such a spirit. She noticed something else too. Sometimes that evil glint in her eye disappeared, and Gemma looked like a kid having a good ole blast. She prayed that the egotistical trance that Rindy had hypnotized her into would get enough holes poked in it for her to see it for the ugly thing that it was.

The last day, before Gemma left, while she sat at the table eating a peanut butter sandwich, Cathy asked her, “Isn’t Quentin one of the best-looking little boys you’ve ever seen in your life?”

“He’s handsome,” Rachel said.

Gemma blinked from surprise. “He wasn’t so ignorant this time.”

*That’s because Rindy wasn’t around to provoke him,* Cathy thought. She didn’t want to bad-mouth Rindy before Gemma and get on the wrong side of the Bayers. She hadn’t met them but didn’t want to after meeting Rindy. John had recently completed the business transaction for their log cabin home without her.

“Did you have fun, Gemma?” Cathy asked.

“Yeah,” she said with a shrug, like it was no big deal.

*But she said yes,* Cathy thought. *And that was a start.*

Two days after Gemma and Tom left, Cathy was sitting on her porch enjoying the peace and quiet of a cool, sunny morning. Rachel walked out and sat on the porch steps with her elbows on her knees,

cupping her chin in her hands. She tried to discern Rachel's mood. *Thoughtful, inquisitive.*

"Does Dad love me?"

"Your father and I suffered at the hands of evil people. That's why he's like the way he is. When he leaves you alone, it means you're okay with him."

Cathy wanted to tell her the whole story of her life, about why they came here and why her father didn't want her to leave but feared she couldn't handle it at this age. She didn't want Rachel to spend her young life looking over her shoulder worried about a vengeful Daddy Jones.

Rachel kissed and held her mother.

"I'm so sorry, my beautiful mommy, that somebody hurt you."

*Hold me, my dear child. Hold me like I need to be held.*

"Hi cowboy," Cathy said.

Quentin approached on his small bike wearing a cowboy hat and boots.

"Nice to see you folks. The world needs love, doesn't it?"

Rachel relived a memory of singing a song at the request of her teacher back in Columbus that was composed of those very words. She sang the first stanza for Quentin and her mother, "What the world needs now, is love sweet love. That's the only thing that there's just too little of."

Quentin reacted the way everyone did, with a dreamy-eyed smile. Rachel flinched while noticing her mother's reaction because Cathy dropped her gaze and appeared crestfallen.

*My God,* Cathy thought, how charismatic and naturally talented. *That rendition could be a hit tune.* She recalled reading that the entertainer Dean Martin achieved fame and fortune without a single

voice or acting lesson. She feared mega-stardom with its divorce and untimely death rate. She remembered a scripture where Jesus told his followers that they would be sheep among wolves.

*Wolves. Let no predator in any form take my daughter,* she prayed.

“Hee – haw that was great, girl! Now you can practice with one of my cowboy songs.”

Quentin pushed a button on his cassette player in the basket attached to the handlebars. She heard “Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie,” and her smile became a frown. “Get your horse, girl, let’s ride!”

Rachel got her small red bike from the garage. *Wow, no training wheels,* Quentin thought, impressed.

“That’s a hillbilly song,” Rachel said.

“We’re all hillbillies out here, girl.”

They circled around the house with Rachel trying to sing along with Quentin. He tried to teach her to yodel, which got her giggling. She finally managed to sing the prairie song, and Quentin thought she did a good job. He stopped his bike to applaud. She stopped beside him.

“Did Rhiannon call yet?” he asked.

“What, Cannon? Who’s Cannon?”

“No, Rhiannon Darnell – it’s a girl’s name. She’s another girl your age that lives on the west side of Brightwater. Rindy controls her too.”

“No, nobody by that name called me yet.”

“She called me a pig.”

“Why?”

“I burped around her because I wasn’t good enough to talk to.”

“That is piggish!”

“You’re right. I pray for the strength to never do it again. I pray that you don’t turn against me when you play with her.”

“You want God to help me to like you?”

“Yes, it’s better for both of us that we stay friends.”

“Maybe God will get Rhiannon to like you like He did Gemma.”

“Yeah!” Quentin said excitedly. “Will you sing me a different song while we ride?”

“Yes. It’s called ‘Rhythm of the Rain.’”

*How was it possible that a seven-year-old sounded like a professional?* Cathy thought while listening to her again. She wouldn’t leave Brightwater because John wouldn’t permit it. Hopefully she would fall in love with Quentin, live in Brightwater, and avoid such a clash.

“I’m thinking of getting my guns and doing some hunting. I got a spare set. You want to do some practicing?” Quentin asked.

“Practicing?”

“Yeah, we’re going to have to learn how to shoot for real anyhow.”

“Let me ask my mom.”

They rode to the front of the house where Cathy sat with closed eyes and folded hands.

“Hey, Mom, Quentin wants to know if I could play with his toy guns.”

*Guns! Guns!* she thought of John. She actually thought John would approve. She believed John *would* teach his daughter how to shoot a gun – with deadly skill.

“I suppose so.”



“We’re gonna shoot some bears, coyotes, mountain lions, cattle rustlers, and anything that Rachel wants.”

“I want to shoot some cockroaches, snakes, and rats.”

They did. They even shot at each other after a bit. Quentin got the idea to shoot at one another from their bedroom windows while holding their telephones to mimic the sound of pistols firing. They would leap to the center of the window, fire, then leap back behind the wall. Rachel kept getting shot because she couldn’t quit giggling. About fifteen minutes into their duel, her father appeared in the room, startling her. He was holding a big Styrofoam cup, chewing something that swelled his left cheek, glaring at her with those blue eyes. She gaped at him and gulped, aware of herself standing there holding a toy gun. Her father spit into the cup. Then he nodded.

“Gonna teach you how to shoot someday.” He flicked a smile and walked away.

*He smiled!* She gaped at the gun in her hand. She might have to wear a holster more often.

“Hombre,” Quentin whispered.

“Hey, Quentin, I’m tired. I’m gonna hit the sack.”

“Okay,” he said reluctantly. “But I’ll be gunnin’ fer ya tomorrow night.”

Truth was, she was stunned again by her dad’s smiling reaction whenever she held a gun – even though it was only a toy! She walked over and dropped in her bed, placing the pistol on the pillow beside her. *Yeah*, she thought. *I’ll carry this around a little more often.*



*A tale of two children, a boy and a girl, who grow up as neighbors in an isolated forest, where they become part of the supernatural warfare between good and evil.*

## **The Light in The Forest**

By Gabriel Sinclair

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