

# ***Ties That Bind***

## ***Prologue***

It was another sleepy, sultry Indian summer day in the village of Sleepyside, New York. Frank Olyfant could hear the Harley's drone getting louder and louder as it approached Hawthorne Street. Taking a broom, he began to sweep debris from the shabby foyer of his hotel onto the narrow sidewalk.

"Damned stink trees," he muttered, glaring up at the scrubby Tree-of-Heaven pushing its way through the crumbling curb. A sudden breeze sent another flurry of yellow leaves onto the cracked sidewalk, and he gave a final swish of the broom before setting it back inside the grimy doorway.

Standing outside, he shaded his eyes, trying to identify the bike or its rider. Mirrored glasses, a head rag, boots, and a nondescript black leather jacket were not helpful clues. Pulling a pack of unfiltered Pall Malls from the rolled-up sleeve of his T-shirt, Olyfant removed a cigarette and tapped it against his palm to compress any loose shreds of tobacco. He placed it between his lips and withdrew a battered Zippo from his pocket, shielding the flame from any possible breeze as he held it up to the cigarette's end and sucked in the air to light it. Snapping the lighter closed, he replaced it in his pocket, never taking his eyes off the newcomer.

By the time he secured his smokes into the sleeve again, the biker had brought his Hog to a stop and set the kickstand. Dismounting, he stretched his mouth into a grotesque semblance of a grin, revealing his nicotine stained teeth.

"Snake-eyes, you old son of a bitch!" the newcomer exclaimed.

"What're you doin' here, Bull?" Olyfant snarled.

"I just stopped by to see an old buddy. But you don't seem very

happy to see *me*.” Bull retrieved a small tin of tobacco and a packet of rolling papers from the pocket of his leather jacket, and proceeded to roll a cigarette.

“I don’t need no trouble,” the hotelkeeper whined. “The cops have been sniffing around here like a damned pack of bloodhounds since a few break-ins have gone down. They seem to think I might know something about ’em.”

Bull laughed, throwing his head back. “Well, you do, don’t you?” Hunching his shoulders, he took a few pulls at his cigarette, lighting it from a match he then dropped and ground into the sidewalk with his heel.

“I ain’t sayin’.” Olyfant spat, drawing his heavy black eyebrows together in a scowl, but at a venomous glare from his visitor, Olyfant swallowed audibly. Stepping back, he decided to try to smooth things over. “Anyway, it don’t concern you. Why don’t we go inside? I got to keep my nose clean for two more years, and I don’t want no nosy cops seeing me out here talkin’ to the likes of you.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” The powerfully built biker straightened his stooped shoulders and stepped inside to the dimness of the small lobby. “Don’t you have someplace we can talk alone? Where no nosy Parkers will hear us?” he asked, removing his shades and his jacket. His beady eyes darted about the area, taking in the exposed stairwell and the two benches against the outer walls, as well as the raised counter and its barred window.

“Come on into my office,” Olyfant answered. He pulled a key from his pocket and unlocked a door next to the registration desk, which was marked “Private”. “Sit down,” he invited. “What kind of business you got that brings you to Sleepyside?”

“Just two little things,” Bull said. “Little things you can help me with.” He bared his yellow teeth again and reached out a large hand to Olyfant’s arm, which rested on the battered desk. Olyfant broke into a sweat as the grip on his arm became vise-like.

“The first thing is this.” He flipped Olyfant’s skinny arm over,

revealing a tattoo on its inner aspect. “Just remember, Snake-eyes, your business is my business. I’m the boss of this rodeo, and there’s only one way out of the ring.”

Olyfant stared hard at the other man’s arm. It sported a tattoo as well. But while Olyfant’s tattoo depicted a knotted length of rope, Bull’s tattoo showed the horned skull of a longhorn bull.

Olyfant swallowed in an attempt to moisten his suddenly dry mouth. “Ah, don’t get yer back up,” he managed. “I was just shootin’ my mouth off. What do you want to know?”

“There’s a shave-tail kid I’m looking for, a kid I treated like a son. I got word he’s in this area, and I want to look him up. He’s got something of mine, and I want it back. ”

“I can keep my ears open. What’s the kid’s name?” Olyfant’s eyebrows beetled again as he prepared to write down the name.

## ***Part 1***

“I’m so excited!” Sixteen-year-old Trixie Belden bounced up and down on the bus seat, leaning forward to speak to the girl in the seat ahead. “This is going to be the best Halloween party ever, Di!”

Trixie’s seatmate, Honey Wheeler, nodded vigorously. “We’ve had acceptances from forty of the sixty-five people we asked. It’s too bad the soccer team’s final district game falls on the same night, but the date we chose is the only one that Jim and Brian could make.”

“And don’t forget, my parents are taking Bobby and the twins to the Harry Potter Halloween party this weekend, so we couldn’t have it before,” Diana added. Her violet eyes sparkled. “A costume contest, some fun games, and dancing. I can’t wait!” Her black ponytail bobbed. “What’s Mart wearing, Trix?”

Trixie rolled her china-blue eyes. “My almost-twin is keeping his costume a deep, dark secret. He said we’d all be surprised at his

superhero identity.” Mart Belden, eleven months older than his sister, shared her bright blue eyes, blond hair, and freckles. But his curls were concealed by a short crew cut.

“I think Dan’s going as the Green Hornet,” Honey said. “I can’t wait to see that body in tights!” She closed her hazel eyes and a blissful smile crossed her face.

“Don’t let Cheryn hear you talking like that,” Trixie cautioned her friend. “I don’t think she’d like to know you had such thoughts about her boyfriend.”

“I’m going steady, not going blind,” Honey defended herself with a giggle. Her steady boyfriend was Trixie’s eldest brother, darkly handsome Brian, who was a college student along with Honey’s adopted brother Jim Frayne. “I’ve seen Jim’s costume, by the way,” she added with a teasing glance at Trixie, who blushed instantly.

Trixie and Jim had dated off and on, but both insisted they were “just friends” at the moment. Honey and Diana had agreed not to argue the point, but both thought Trixie had more than friendly feelings for the boy she had once described as “the most wonderful boy in the world.”

The three girls giggled and chattered about the party for the rest of the two-mile trip. As the bus shuddered to a stop at the bottom of the Wheeler drive, Honey and Trixie moved to the door, waving good-bye to Diana. Her stop was a bit farther on the route.

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The intercom in Diana’s room crackled to life. “Dinner is served,” announced the dignified voice of Harrison, the Lynches’ very formal butler. Diana put away her schoolwork and powered down her computer (open to a menu suitable for a Halloween party). She hummed “The Monster Mash” as she descended the stairs. Even being pushed aside by her eight-year-old twin brothers, who were racing to get to the table first, didn’t interfere with her happy mood. The three siblings were joined by their twin sisters, aged six, and the two part-time nannies in the family dining room, where their parents

were already seated. Diana slid into the chair next to her father.

“Diana, I’m afraid I have some bad news for you.” Mrs. Lynch cleared her throat and looked as if she was about to cry.

Harrison had just set a roast before Mr. Lynch and was preparing to carve it. Muriel and Eunice, the two maids, had left the room after placing bowls of vegetables, mashed potatoes, and gravy, on the table before Mrs. Lynch.

Diana looked at her mother in apprehension. “Yes, Mummy? What is it?” She hoped it wasn’t bad news about her grandfather, who had been ill recently.

“I had a call today from the box office of the children’s theater group that’s putting on the Harry Potter Halloween party,” Mrs. Lynch said. “Due to illness of three of the cast members, the party is being pushed back to next Saturday.”

“That’s the date of the Bob-Whites’ Halloween party,” Diana exclaimed. “Do you mean you and Daddy won’t be able to chaperone our party?”

“Yes, darling.” Once more, Mrs. Lynch looked on the verge of tears. “I’m afraid you’ll have to cancel your party, or at least put it off until the following week. We’ve already bought the tickets, and this is a one-time production.”

Diana felt like crying herself. The weekend after the party’s planned date would be after Halloween; Jim and Brian wouldn’t be available, and they’d have to notify all of the invited guests of the rescheduling. The idea was daunting.

“All right,” she managed to choke out.

“Sweetheart, do you think you could hold the party at the Beldens’ or the Wheelers’ house?” her father asked.

“Oh, Ed, you know the Beldens are going to that costume party at the Country Club, and the Wheelers will be in Mexico on business

all that week,” Mrs. Lynch reminded him.

“We’d offer to chaperone, but both of us have already accepted invitations for that night,” said one of the nannies. The two college students earned money to pay their tuition and book fees by caring for the four youngest Lynches.

“We’ll just cancel the party. Don’t worry.” Diana knew she would break down if she tried to say more. Her appetite had deserted her and after a few moments of toying with her food, she asked to be excused.

Harrison had taken his place behind Mr. Lynch, waiting until his services were needed again. He coughed softly. “Mr. and Mrs. Lynch, perhaps I could be of assistance in the matter.” He bowed in Diana’s direction. “The Bob-Whites did me a good turn some time back, and I’d be happy to serve as a chaperone, with your permission.”

“Harrison, what a generous offer!” Mrs. Lynch’s blue eyes glowed.

“It’s very kind of you,” Mr. Lynch agreed. “But do you really think you’re equipped to watch out for forty or fifty teenagers, prevent alcohol use and handle gatecrashers as well as monitor ... er, *private* displays of affection?”

“I don’t wish to speak for others, sir,” Harrison replied. “But I’d be happy to ask Miss Trask and Regan to assist me. I believe they’d agree.”

“All right, then. If Miss Trask and Regan agree to help, you have my permission to hold the party here, Diana.” Mr. Lynch smiled at his daughter, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “I’d feel comfortable leaving you here with those three.”

Diana gave Harrison her most radiant smile. She jumped up from her chair and threw her arms around him in a bear hug. “Thank you, thank you!” she cried.

Harrison seemed a bit taken aback by her sudden gesture, but he retained enough presence of mind to say, "You're very welcome, Miss Diana. I'm happy to do something for you and the Bob-Whites."

"Oh, I just hope Miss Trask and Regan will say yes," she said, releasing him from her hug. "I hope they will."

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Dusk had settled on Hawthorne Street, blurring the ramshackle outlines of Olyfant's Hotel. The gloomy atmosphere was exaggerated by the skeletal shadows of bare tree branches, which broke up the light cast by a nearly full moon. Flicking the embers of a still-burning cigarette to the cracked sidewalk, a hulking, black-jacketed figure strode purposefully to the door and walked inside.

Olyfant was behind the registration desk, counting out bills from the cash register. He straightened up as a gust of wind blew in with the newcomer.

"What can I do for you today ... er, that is, good to see you, Bull." He pulled the registration desk's grilled opening closed, and disappeared momentarily, opening the door marked, "Private" and gesturing to his visitor. "In here." As the taller man passed through the door, Olyfant's eyes darted about the shabby foyer and up the stairwell, but no human being was in sight. He closed the door with a click, and seconds later another metallic click signaled it was locked.

"What news you got for me, Snake-eyes?" The other man's dark eyes were boring a hole through Olyfant's forehead, and he felt sweat break out on his palms.

"I got some information on your boy," he began. "He's sittin' pretty, palling around with a bunch of rich kids. Lives out on Glen Road, on the Wheeler estate. You heard of Matthew Wheeler, I reckon?"

"Who hasn't?" Bull was licking the edge of his rolling paper and sticking it down to the cylinder of tobacco held delicately between his strong fingers. "Cut to the chase, Snake-eyes." With the rolled cigarette between his lips, he struck a match. Its flare highlighted

Olyfant's bald forehead above the beetling black brows – a forehead beaded with nervous sweat.

“Okay, okay.” Olyfant took a deep breath and began again, raising his hands in a placating gesture. “His best friends are the Belden kids, that would be Peter Belden the banker's kids; Lynch the millionaire's oldest girl, and Wheeler's girl. They all go to Sleepyside Junior-Senior High School.” He began the ritual of lighting his own cigarette.

“That ain't enough, Snake-eyes.” Bull blew a puff of smoke across the table and pounded his fist on the table. “I need to get some solid dope on this kid, where he hangs out and where I can get him alone. Spill it, now.” Olyfant, startled by the outburst, coughed and sputtered as he inhaled more of the burning cigarette than he had intended.

Recovering his breath, Olyfant gulped and began again. “You'll never be able to get him while he's on Wheeler property. That place is a damned wildlife sanctuary, and after he caught a couple of poachers last year, Wheeler had the whole place tricked out with electronic surveillance. Best money can buy.”

“Damn it, Snake-eyes, quit jerkin' me around.” Bull grabbed Olyfant by the neck of his shirt and pulled him halfway across the desk. “I ain't paying you to tell me where I *can't* get to my kid. It's yer job to tell me where I *can* get close to him. Now spill it.” He let loose of the other man's clothing and sat down, fixing Olyfant with a steely glare.

“Okay, okay. I was gettin' to that.” Olyfant pulled a grubby handkerchief from his picket and mopped his streaming forehead. “See, the Lynch girl's having a Halloween party this weekend, at her place. No electronic surveillance there, see? Your boy and all of his rich friends are gonna be there. You should be able to figure out how to get him alone sometime during the night.” His face worked in what might have been a tentative grin.

“A teenage party, huh?” Bull looked somewhat pleased, for the first time. “What about the parents, hey?”



“Parents gonna be out of town. Old man Lynch hired a security crew and the food’s being catered.”

“What security firm and what caterers?” Bull jabbed his cigarette into an ashtray on Olyfant’s desk and began to roll himself a new one while Olyfant pulled a folded piece of paper from his wallet. Smoothing it onto the scarred surface, he began to read what was written on it.

“Reliance Security Service, bonded and insured. You’ve been relying on us to protect you since 1947. 555-6215. That’s the security outfit. They’ve got a good rep, but it seems they’ve hired a couple of new guys lately.” Olyfant looked up from the slip of paper and grinned. “The caterers are Town and Country Caterers. Catering to fit your budget. 555-3663. They’re a local outfit and pretty small.”

“So it wouldn’t be too hard to get onto Lynch’s place and maybe take a second job for the evening, eh?” Bull chuckled, a chilling sound. “Where is this Lynch place?” He leaned back and blew a thin stream of smoke from each nostril. “I better scope it out so I’ll know where to meet my kid. I’m sure he’ll want to share some of the ... benefits ... of his new life. Especially when he realizes the penalty for being greedy.”

“I got a map here,” said Olyfant. “Look here, I’ll show you where it is.”

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Late in the afternoon of the party’s date, the elder Lynches were saying their good-byes to Diana before departing for the city.

“Diana, darling, don’t hesitate to call us for any reason.” Mrs. Lynch’s forehead was puckered with worry. “I hate to leave you children alone here after this rash of break-ins. If the little ones wouldn’t be so disappointed, I’d have cancelled our seats at the Harry Potter Halloween party, no matter how expensive the tickets were.” She chewed her lip in agitation. Several burglaries in Sleepyside during the past week had nearly caused Diana’s mother to cancel her

plans with her younger children in order to be at home during the teenagers' party.

"Mother, don't worry about a thing." Mr. Lynch's laugh boomed out. "Reliance Security is the finest security service in the state, and they came highly recommended by Matthew Wheeler." When Honey had told her father about Mrs. Lynch's worries, he had suggested the security firm his company used. "They'll handle any party-crashers who may show up, and one guard will remain to patrol the property all night. Besides, Harrison, Miss Trask, and Regan will be here. Those three won't let anything get out of control, with the guests or with our children and their dates."

"Daddy's right, Mummy," Diana agreed. "We're responsible and the security service will make sure no one gets in who's not supposed to be here. Harrison and Miss Trask will make sure we don't do anything we're not supposed to do. You go on and have a good time!" She hugged her mother. "I'll prove you didn't make a mistake in trusting the Bob-Whites!"

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"Lynch might be a bigwig when it comes to money, but he ain't got a clue about securing his property," Bull muttered to himself, standing in a small copse of trees at the bottom of the Lynches' back yard. While the house itself had a top-of-the-line electronic security system, the acreage around it was not protected.

It was quite dark and he had no worries that he might be seen by the teenaged revelers. True, a security guard patrolled the perimeter of the property every hour, but Bull had been concealed in his spot since early morning. It had been a piece of cake to have Olyfant drop him off at the Lynches' front gate and drive away; he had made several visits to the property earlier in the week, arriving when the Lynch kids were at school and the parents out of the house. The Lynches kept only a small staff, not even a gardener. The prissy butler Harrison didn't worry him at all. And Harrison, a middle-aged lady, and a young man were the only adults on the place tonight, barring the security staff and caterers.

He fingered the .38 Special revolver tucked into a shoulder holster. While he had no intentions of shooting anyone tonight, it was shortsighted not to carry insurance. In addition, if the boy balked, the weapon might help to convince him.

Bull rolled and lit another cigarette. The guard had passed within twenty feet of his location exactly 3 minutes ago, and it would be another thirty minutes before he made his way back again – plenty of time for a smoke. He checked his watch – nearly ten-thirty p.m.

“Party should be breaking up in another hour,” he murmured to himself, his mouth twisting into an evil grin. “When the guard makes his next round, I’ll acquire myself a new outfit. I’d like to be properly dressed for the party.”

Fifteen minutes later, a crack of thunder and a flash of lightning caused him to adjust his plans. No rain was falling yet, but clouds scudded across the sky, creating eerie changes in the light of the full moon, and promising rain sooner rather than later. Bull put out his cigarette between his finger and thumb, and carefully concealed it in the pocket of his jacket.

The guard was still nowhere in sight, so he zigzagged his way to the house, ending up next to a covered outdoor terrace. He could see the partygoers dancing and eating, clustered in little groups inside, in a long room with a fireplace at each end. It was hard to pick out his prey, though – most of the guests were wearing masks as well as costumes. *That don’t matter – I’m waiting until everyone leaves anyway*, Bull reminded himself.

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Regan stretched and yawned, trying to shake off his sleepiness. Chaperoning the party had been much more tolerable than he had expected, but he still longed for his quiet apartment. There was a storm rolling in, and it looked to be a doozy. Although he knew the horses were safe in their stalls, he didn’t feel comfortable being away from Manor House when the weather was so foul.

“Regan?” Margery Trask inquired from behind him. “Would

you mind going back to the house once everyone's gone? I really think Harrison and I can handle things here, and I'm not sure I like the idea of the house sitting empty on a night like this – especially with all the recent burglaries.”

“Great minds think alike,” Regan answered. “I was just thinking along those same lines. I hate having the horses alone with the storm coming, but I didn't want to leave you and Harrison in the lurch.”

“We'll be fine,” Miss Trask assured him. “Once we get everyone safely on their way, you can head home and keep an eye on things. I think that's the best course of action for all of us.”

“Well, you're the boss,” Regan acquiesced with a grin. “I'm going to step out for a little air. Come and get me when we start cleaning up, okay?”

“I'll do that. Right now I'm going to find Harrison and have a chat with Mr. Williams. I'll find you.” Miss Trask smiled and headed for the kitchen, leaving Regan to make a beeline for the porch.

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“When would you like your check, Mr. Williams?” Miss Trask asked the head of security. “Mr. Lynch left it in the office.”

“My men will be heading out as soon as the last of the kids leave, ma'am,” Ernie Williams said to Miss Trask. “I told Mr. Lynch I'd stay through the night, just as a precaution. I'll collect the payment in the morning before I leave.”

“Very well.” A buzzing noise caught Miss Trask's attention, and she retrieved her cell phone from her sensible tan leather bag. “Please excuse me, Mr. Williams. I need to take this call.” With a nod, she stepped into the Lynch office, leaving the guard to return to the gallery, watching the guests as they said their goodbyes.

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As the last of the guests were leaving, a flash of lightning lit up the gallery in direct contrast to the party lights strung along the walls. Diana Lynch shivered in her Wonder Woman costume, moving a little closer to her boyfriend, Mart Belden. Storms always made her nervous, and being well aware of that fact, Mart wrapped his Spiderman clad arm around her shoulders protectively. "One thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand..." His counting was cut off by an answering roll of thunder as he approached eight. "See," he continued, "the storm is at least eight miles away. Everyone's leaving now, anyway, so we can batten down the hatches and ride it out."

"But Dan still needs to take Cheryn home," Di reminded him. "I hate to think of them on the road with bad weather."

"Dan's not afraid of a leettle rain," an amused voice spoke from behind them. Di turned to see the man in question grinning at her from behind his Zorro mask. "In fact, Dan would rather be driving een thees storm than walking een eet."

"Oh, you!" Diana swatted at him playfully. "Stop talking about yourself in the third person. It's weird."

"But I am El Zorro, senorita, not thees Dan person." He touched the brim of his broad-rimmed black hat.

"Fine, Zorro," Di grinned. "When you see my friend, Dan, tell him I said to be careful taking Cheryn home, and to hurry back. We're having chocolate cake and movies as soon as we get cleaned up."

"I will tell him thees," he replied, switching back to his regular voice as he added, "You can save some clean up for me, Di. I feel guilty leaving you in the lurch."

"I told Cheryn she was welcome to spend the night with the rest of us, but she has a family thing tomorrow," Di told him. "So that's not your fault. Just hurry back. If we get done, we'll be in the den."

He raised his mask and winked at her. "I'll try, but these things

take time.”

Diana laughed and snuggled back under Mart’s arm. “You’re incorrigible!” she told Dan. “Completely incorrigible.”

“And proud of it, baby.” Dan pulled his mask back into place and resumed his bad accent. “Keeses, mi amiga.” He dropped a quick kiss on Di’s forehead and swung his black cape with a flamboyant flare as he strode away.

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Dan held his cape over Cheryn Russell’s head as they dodged raindrops on the way to the station wagon. He held the door for her as she slipped inside, laughing as she tucked the skirt of her angel costume around her legs and arranged her wings so they weren’t blocking the door. Running around to the other side, he managed to shut his cape in the door. Tugging it free, Dan grinned sheepishly at his date. “Oops!”

“Blame it on the wind,” Cheryn giggled, her blue eyes crinkling. A mighty gust of the aforementioned wind rattled the car as he started it. Cheryn sobered. “I wish you didn’t have to drive me home in this weather,” she offered apologetically. “I would have stayed, but it’s my grandma’s birthday tomorrow...”

“It’s okay,” Dan assured her. “Family comes first, Cher. Always.”

“I’ll make it up to you,” she promised. “I’ll protect you from all the ghosts and ghouls with my angel powers.” She leaned over and kissed his cheek, the feathers from her wings brushing his neck.

Dan slipped into his Zorro accent. “El Zorro ees counting on that, senorita. Muy, muy counting.” He waggled an eyebrow at her as he put the car in reverse.

## ***Part 2***

Bull thought for a moment about picking up a few of the smaller *objets d'art* displayed in the gallery while he waited. Several were small enough to be concealed in a pocket. No one would notice until the following day – or even later – and any missing items could logically be attributed to a light-fingered guest. But he reminded himself of why he was here. “The boy can help me acquire a few pieces, once he understands what’s what. And he’ll keep the attention away from me. I just gotta have patience,” he told himself.

Just then, he heard a soft click. The head guard had returned from his task of patrolling the grounds and had entered the house by the terrace door, locking it behind him. Bull straightened up. Now was the opportunity he had been waiting for all night.

He could see the flashes of light as the guard shone his flashlight around the inside terrace, moving gradually closer to the gallery. Bull lifted a heavy urn from a decorative column and moved stealthily to the sliding doors. As soon as the guard entered the gallery, turning his attention away from Bull’s direction, he Bull brought the urn down onto the back of his head. Without even a grunt, the man dropped like a stone, his face striking the door jamb as he fell. A low moan escaped him as Bull pulled him fully into the gallery and closed both sets of doors.

Blood trickled from a small cut on the guard’s head as well as from his nose. Bull grunted with satisfaction to see that he was unconscious, but not dead. With deft fingers, he removed the guard’s uniform shirt, pants, and shoes, donning them himself. He clipped the security firm’s radio onto the belt, and made sure he had the guard’s handcuffs. His gun went into the guard’s flashlight holster, while he slipped the heavy flashlight into his uniform trouser pocket. As his final touch, Bull took a rubber mask representing former President Ronald Reagan from his jeans pocket, and pulled it over his head. The uniform was a bit loose on him, but not so much that it would seem out of place. Placing the guard’s wallet and other personal possessions into his own pockets, he rolled up his discarded clothing and stashed it inside the urn, which now lay on its side on the floor.

He looked around for a place to conceal the unconscious guard, but there were no hiding places in the gallery. Using the guard's flashlight, he consulted his floor plan again, and found that there was a coat closet just outside of the gallery, off the main hallway. Opening the double doors as if to continue a security patrol, he checked the foyer and hall. The coast was still clear – the teenaged hosts remained outside, directing traffic in the rain, and the adult chaperones were nowhere to be seen. Quickly, he handcuffed the guard and dragged him to the coat closet. "You'll be safe there," he sneered, stuffing a balled-up handkerchief into the unconscious man's mouth. "Quiet, too."

Just as the closet door clicked shut, a middle-aged, grey-haired woman came out of the study directly across from the gallery he had just left. *Damn! Must be that Trask woman – the Wheeler girl's nanny.* Aloud, he said only, "Just checking all doors. Everything looks fine, ma'am."

The woman stared at him, a puzzled frown on her face. "Mr. Williams, why did you put on a mask? You weren't in costume earlier, and the party's over now."

"They say curiosity killed the cat," Bull replied, drawing his revolver and letting her see it before taking her arm in a firm grip and leading her back into the study. The Trask woman didn't put up a struggle; she had gotten a very clear view of his weapon.

Inside the study, he patted her down, keeping his gun in one hand. In the pocket of her skirt he found a cell phone and a clean handkerchief. The phone he disabled and slipped into his pocket, and the handkerchief made a fine gag. Next, he pulled a packet of large-sized plastic locking zip ties from the guard's shirt uniform pocket, and quickly fastened her hands together behind her back, giving a good yank on the end. Now that her silence was assured and her hands out of commission, he placed his gun on the desk, well out of range even if she lunged for it. Apparently frozen in fear, she made no effort to resist when he forced her to crawl on her knees and curl up under the desk. A couple of ties linked together would keep her from crawling back out, and he tied her ankles together with another vicious yank.



“Nobody has to be a hero and nobody has to get hurt, see?” he said to the woman. She stared back at him as if trying to see through the Reagan mask. Bull was glad he had decided to use it; although it had aroused her suspicion, no way would she be able to identify him later. “I’m just here for what’s mine. My boy.”

Now the woman looked frightened, more than she had when he showed his weapon. Bull felt a flash of curiosity, but time was passing, and there were things he needed to do. Namely, to discover the whereabouts of his target. The kids had all been outside when he came in; he hoped they were still out there. It would be easier to isolate his target outside. Turning out the desk lamp, which had been on when he entered the study, he left the Trask woman under the desk. She was out of commission, at least long enough for him to finish his job.

The hallway and foyer were still deserted, so Bull once more assumed the role of security guard, sweeping the area with his flashlight as he headed for the front door. Out the door and down the steps, he turned in the direction of the garage, where he could hear snatches of conversation.

Unfortunately, he was accosted by a tall, redheaded man – the Wheelers’ stable manager, Regan, he decided, since it obviously was not the Lynch butler. “Nice work, Mr. Williams,” the man began. “Your firm did a great job keeping out the gatecrashers.” His hand was already extended in greeting when he got the same look on his face as the Trask woman had. *Frigging mask might not have been such a hot idea.*

“What’s the deal with the mask, Mr. Williams? The party’s over,” Regan said, dropping his hand to his side.

Bull already had the flashlight in his hand, and his reflexes were quick. A stunning blow to the head and the big man dropped like a stone. “Here’s a nice set of bracelets for you,” Bull muttered, snapping his second set of handcuffs around the redhead’s wrists. He looked around for a place to conceal Regan. The rain had stopped momentarily, but the ground was sodden. The kids’ voices were no

longer audible, and he decided they had gone back inside the house. Grunting with the exertion, he began to drag his victim toward the garage by his belt and the cuffs. It was a stroke of good luck that the garage door was open, and he let Regan drop in a heap against an outside wall, concealed from immediate view by a large sedan parked in one of the bays.

“You might sing when you wake up,” he commented to the inert figure. “Maybe you’ve got a hankie on you, too.” Sure enough, a muddy red bandana turned up in the back pocket of Regan’s jeans. Twisting the cloth tightly, he tied it tightly across the groom’s mouth.

“Now for the pause that refreshes,” Bull muttered. He removed his smoking supplies from a pocket, rolled a cigarette, and stood just outside the garage door, smoking and planning his next move. Two adults were down, one was left. The prissy butler shouldn’t be any kind of challenge, though.

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Lightning flashed across the sky, illuminating the skeletons of leaf-stripped trees. The crack of thunder was almost simultaneous, strong enough to cause the house to tremble. Bull picked his way across the yard, rain soaking him. It was fitting, he thought. An evil night for evil deeds. A malicious smile spread across his sallow face. The silly governess and the groom were out of commission. Each person he eliminated drew him that much closer to the prize—his son. The smile turned predatory. He could feel the excitement building, the blood pumping through his veins.

At the edge of the house, he paused. Ignoring the driving rain, he leaned down and grasped a thin, rubber-coated wire. Like a knife through melted butter, the wire snapped as he gently squeezed the side cutters. Child’s play, he thought, satisfaction coursing through him. The thought of the teenagers panicking when they discovered the land-line was out of commission was more satisfying than he ever could have imagined. This was almost *too* easy.

Sliding the cutters back into his pocket, he crept through the door leading to kitchen entrance. Another bright flash of lightning

and roar of thunder spurred him to move quickly, though his movements remained silent. With practiced ease, he closed the door soundlessly behind him. He crept past the stainless steel appliances and state-of-the-art gadgets, listening intently. A partially-closed door leading the butler's pantry caught his attention. More specifically, the line of light beneath it.

His body was instantly still, his senses on high alert. He could hear movement behind the door; a shuffling tread, and a low voice humming.

The butler.

He waited, tucked out of sight behind the pantry door. His fingertips began to tingle with anticipation. Focusing on the sounds from the room, he heard dishes scraping, the sliding of drawers, and the tinkle of cutlery. Footsteps that moved nearer to the door, then away again. Whistling that grew more cheerful as the work neared completion.

Not wanting to chance Harrison getting a good look at him, he crouched behind the door, biding his time. In a matter of minutes, he was rewarded. Still whistling cheerfully, Harrison pushed the door open. Using the butt of his gun, Bull brought his arm down swiftly and decisively on the unsuspecting man's skull.

Harrison went down like a sack of potatoes.

"So easy," he murmured, staring at the unconscious man. He toed Harrison roughly in the ribs, but he didn't so much as flinch. He unceremoniously shoved him back into the butler's pantry. With a slow smile, he picked up a stack of carefully folded linen. There was no telling how long the butler would remain unconscious, so he gagged him with a six hundred thread count navy napkin, and covered him with the matching tablecloth.

As a final touch, he secured the butler's hands with a zip tie, tightening them enough that, even if he should regain consciousness, he wouldn't be tempted to try to remove them.

He was bent over the still form, adjusting the tablecloth, when he heard heavy footsteps in the kitchen.

“Harrison?” a young man's voice called out. Bull listened intently. Not *his* boy's voice, he realized.

“Harrison? Are you in here? I'm just getting some snacks ready...” The boy's voice trailed off as he realized the kitchen was empty.

Bull knew the exact moment the boy saw the light under the door to the butler's pantry.

“Harrison? You need any help in there?” he asked.

The door swung open. With surprising speed, Bull's arm snaked out and caught Mart around the neck. He chuckled at the look of surprise on the young man's face. Before even a squeak could escape his lips, Bull squeezed tight, cutting off the boy's air supply.

He grunted as the stocky farm boy collapsed, but supported his weight easily. “Pleased to meet you,” he snarled, laying him down beside Harrison. “Any friend of my boy's is a friend of mine,” he chuckled. He twisted Mart's arms behind his back and secured him with another zip tie.

“You may as well get comfortable,” he continued, even though Mart couldn't hear him. “You're not going anywhere for a very long time.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Jim? Mr. Brian?” The voice came from the dark hallway. Jim stepped out of the gallery, Brian close on his heels. Brian reached for the light switch, but the dim orange glow of the Halloween lights barely made a dent in the darkness.

“What is it?” Jim asked the security guard.

“We have a couple of problems,” the man replied. He held out a bloodstained hand.

Immediately, Brian was moving forward. “What happened? How did you get hurt?”

“It’s not me,” the guard responded, jerking his hand away from Brian. It’s Mr. Harrison. He cut himself. He asked if I could find Mr. Brian because he’s afraid he might need stitches.”

“Where is he?” Brian asked.

“In the butler’s pantry, sitting down. I’ll take you there, but first...” the guard turned to Jim. “One of my men just radioed in. Your friend, Dan? He’s at the bottom of the drive with a flat tire. Jeffries offered to help, but your friend told him to go before the storm gets worse. He said you and Mr. Mart could handle it. I think Mr. Mart is on his way down, now.”

Jim turned to Brian. “You go check on Harrison, I’ll help Dan and Mart. Then we’d better batten down the hatches – I think this is going to be a long night.”

Brian nodded, his dark eyes somber. “Will you let the girls know?” he asked. “I don’t want them wondering where we are. I can just see Trixie and Honey searching for us in the storm.” Jim nodded, turning back to the gallery as Brian followed the guard down the shadowed hall.

The guard, Mr. Williams, if Brian was remembering correctly, set a quick pace down the hallway. When he reached the door to the butler’s pantry, he stepped back into the shadows to allow Brian to pass him.

The pantry was dark, but Brian could make out a still form huddled in the corner. “Harrison?” he inquired, moving closer to the lump. “How badly are you hurt?” With shock, Brian realized that the butler was unconscious, blood streaming from the side of his head. As he leaned forward to investigate, he felt a whisper of air, a sharp pain, and then his whole world went black.

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Jim dropped a kiss on Trixie's forehead and took the full trash bag from her hand. "I'll drag this to the garage on my way down to help Dan with the tire. That way you girls can stay dry."

"Hurry back," Trixie told him with an impish grin. "We're almost done, and those movies won't wait all night."

"I'll do my best," he promised, tugging at the curl that had escaped the confines of her Cat Woman headpiece. "After all, I'm Batman!" Her chortles followed him out the door.

The storm was picking up. Jim made his way to the garage to dispose of the trash, stuffing the party remains deep into the galvanized can. A small grin lit up his face at the whiff of bleach that escaped as he removed the lid. *Sanitized for my protection*, ran through his head as he replaced the lid and headed outside. A gust of wind caught Jim's Batman cape as he stepped into the breezeway, flinging it up into his face. At the same time, he was jerked backwards, a heavily muscled arm pressing tightly against his throat.

Caught off-guard, Jim struggled, trying vainly to free himself from the iron grip threatening his air supply. His silent attacker increased the pressure, and Jim felt his head spinning as he ran out of oxygen. As he lost consciousness, he heard a gruff, "Gotcha, boy," and a whiff of an eerily familiar tobacco.

With a grunt, the guard formerly known as Williams lowered Jim's still body to the ground, pulling the zip ties from his pocket as he did so. He quickly secured the young man's hands with the ties, propping him up against the door of the garage.

Looking with disdain at Jim's prostrate body, he reached into his pocket and took out a tin of tobacco and rolling papers and proceeded to roll a cigarette. Inhaling deeply, he blew the smoke out into the chill of the night, chuckling at the ease of his mission.

"Almost time," he rasped to the darkness. Dropping the half-smoked butt onto the ground next to Jim, he crushed it beneath his boot and turned himself back toward the house. "Now the fun begins."

Honey straightened a cushion, and picked up a crumpled orange napkin from under the couch. "I think that's everything, don't you, Di?" She dropped the napkin into the wastepaper basket, and turned to her friends. Diana was wiping down the tables, while Trixie finished sweeping the floor.

"Yes, I think that's it. Everyone seemed to have a good time, didn't they?" Diana smiled. "I'm glad after all that Mummy insisted on hiring caterers for the food. We had enough to do as hosts and hostesses, without having to worry about restocking the trays and keeping the empty glasses picked up. Cleanup was a breeze since the caterers put all the leftover food away."

"Not that there was much left over," Trixie added. She carried the broom and dustpan over to where Honey waited, and dumped contents into the trash bin. "Let's go up to your room and change out of these costumes while we wait for Dan to get back," she suggested with a grimace. "I really need to get out of this catsuit!"

"Yes, let's. We can be changed and ready to watch the scary movie Dan brought by the time the guys get the tire changed." Diana turned out the light and the girls headed for the stairs.

Diana led the way upstairs to her room, where the three of them would sleep that night. Regan and the boys were bunking together in the enclosed terrace downstairs, while Miss Trask was to use the guest room across the hall from Diana's.

Once in Di's attractive suite, Trixie headed straight for the bathroom to change into looser clothing and wash off her makeup. With her face covered in cold cream, she turned back into the room, where her two friends were changing from their superhero costumes into jeans and tee shirts. "Do you know what Miss Trask and Regan are doing now?" she asked. "They aren't working, I hope."

"Miss Trask told me Harrison invited them to watch a movie with him in his quarters," Honey replied, tying the lace of her sneaker. "I haven't seen her for awhile, so that's where they probably are now. I'm sure she'll check on us in a bit."

Fifteen minutes later, the trio had finished changing and gone back downstairs to the Lynches' cozy den. Two overstuffed couches and a comfy easy chair faced the big-screen television, and a low square coffee table made a good serving area for snacks. Each girl chose a couple of throw pillows and staked out a spot, while Diana tossed her friends an afghan apiece.

"Let's turn on the news and check the weather while we're waiting for the boys," Honey suggested. "I was so worried about Dan driving to town and back in this storm, and he goes and gets a flat in the driveway."

Trixie had commandeered the remote, and pressed the power button. The TV screen flared to life, and flickered as she scanned the channels for a weather report.

"There! Storm Team 11 special report," Diana cried, pointing. Trixie backed up to the channel Diana had indicated. The girls listened with much greater attention than they usually paid to the news and weather.

"I'm Kevin Harper, of Storm Team 11, covering one of the worst storms of the current hurricane season for Westchester County." The announcer was shown standing in a torrential downpour outside of the television station at White Plains. His bright yellow poncho flapped in the gale, and although he huddled under a huge black umbrella, rain streamed down his face.

"Outlying areas of Westchester County have experienced flash flooding. State Police have confirmed that the lower river road at Sleepyside is under water and closed to vehicular traffic. There are scattered power outages throughout the county."

"Residents are advised to stay off roads except for essential services. Anyone who needs to be evacuated from their home, please call 9-1-1. Kevin Harper, Storm Team 11, keeping you up to date with the severe storm situation. Stay tuned to Storm Team 11 for the latest updates." The television screen switched back to the newsroom at the White Plains station, and the girls looked at each other.



“I just hope the boys are all right.” Honey worried her lower lip between her teeth. “I’m sure my parents’ flight will be delayed – there’s no way a plane could land in this storm.”

“Moms and Dad have to cross that bridge, too,” Trixie’s face wore a worried frown. “I hope it’ll be all right when they’re ready to come home.” She stood and walked over to the window. “It’s still raining like anything over here.”

“Thank goodness Mummy and Daddy are staying in the city overnight,” Diana said. She looked at her watch. “The boys will be cold and wet when they get back. I’m going to go make some hot chocolate and grab the cake.” She jumped up and headed for the door leading back into the hallway.

Trixie and Honey looked at each other. “They ought to be back any minute,” Trixie said. “Why don’t you call them and see where they are?”

“Trixie, you know the Lynches’ driveway is a mile long. It could take a long time – especially in the dark.” Honey reached into the pocket where she normally kept her cell phone. “Oh! I forgot, my battery was down and I left my phone on the charger at home.” She shrugged. “Jim’s got his – why don’t you call him?”

“Mart’s carrying our phone tonight,” Trixie replied. “I’ll be glad for one thing when he goes away to college – I’ll have a phone to myself then.”

Just then, a blinding flash of lightning caused Trixie to jump back from the window. The answering boom of thunder shook the house, and the television screen went black, along with the lamp at one end of the sofa, and the night light that had been burning in the hallway. Trixie and Honey almost stumbled over the coffee table as they moved to close the distance between them, as a crash and a bloodcurdling scream broke the sudden silence of the dark house.

“That was Di!” Trixie breathed. The two girls stared at each other, frightened for the first time since the storm began.

### ***Part 3***

Dan gripped the steering wheel a little more tightly as a loud crack of thunder echoed, and then forced himself to relax. Sneaking a glance at his passenger, he smiled.

“It's just thunder,” he said, reaching for her hand.

Cheryn raised an eyebrow. “But it's Halloween.” She laced her fingers through his.

Dan's lips twitched. “That makes a difference?” he questioned.

Cheryn nodded, eyes twinkling. “Definitely. Thunder is much more serious on Halloween than on any other night.”

Several bright flashes and a thundering roll interrupted them.

“See?” Cheryn demanded.

“It's a pretty impressive storm,” Dan acknowledged. He flicked the windshield wipers on high as the rain increased.

Dan fell silent as he piloted the car through the inky black night. Though he would never admit it aloud, he couldn't help feeling that maybe Cheryn was right about storms on Halloween being more serious. There was a charge in the air that had him peering into the darkness, looking for...something. Nothing. Anything. All he saw was the dark countryside, lit by occasional flashes of lightning. Still, something didn't feel right.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts and squeezed his girlfriend's hand again. “Almost home,” he said, as they pulled onto her street. He stopped several houses away, and turned off the ignition.

Beside him, Cheryn smiled. “So,” she said, fingering the wings of

her costume. "I'm not entirely familiar with the legends of Zorro." Her eyes tracked up and down his dark costume. "Does he ever get to kiss the girl at the end?"

Dan grinned, thoughts of thunder and lightning banished. "Definitely."

Long minutes later, Dan reluctantly pulled away. "We should get you home," he said, running a hand through his hair. He pulled into her driveway, then ran around to open her door for her.

They hurried to the door, laughing as the rain soaked them, and water ran off their hair and costumes.

"Happy Halloween," Dan whispered as she let herself into the house.

Back in the car, he stripped off his cape and pulled at the collar of his wet shirt. He eased the car out of town and turned on to the main thoroughfare. His earlier sense of unease returned, and he found himself staring into the dark night. The wind suddenly gusted around him, and he found himself struggling to keep the car on the road. He let out a deep breath and concentrated on keeping the car between the dividing lines. Even set on high, the windshield wipers couldn't keep up with the torrent of rain. He slowed his speed—the last thing he needed was to start hydroplaning.

Dan could practically feel the tension leaving his body when he turned on to the driveway leading to the Lynch Estate. Almost there...

A flash of lightning illuminated the night with startling clarity. Dan could see every tree, every brush, and every blade of grass for miles. The crack of thunder hit at almost exactly the same time. Lightning continued to flash, and the thunder rolled for what felt like minutes. In reality, though, Dan knew that there had only been a second between that first horrible flash and the crack that was *not* thunder. He slammed on the brakes and watched in horror as one of the oldest trees on the Lynch property teetered and crashed only a few yards in front of him.

In the brief, garish glare, Dan could see the tree quite clearly as he fish-tailed to a complete stop, gravel flying. He sat, stunned, hands grasping the wheel so tightly that his knuckles were white. When his heart rate slowed, he forced himself to let go of the wheel, and put the vehicle in park. He stared into the dark night, his breathing rough.

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Trixie and Honey clutched each other's arms as they stood in the Lynches' den, unable to move for a moment as the scream was abruptly cut off. What could it mean?

"We've got to go check on Di, Honey!" Trixie whispered. "Do you think she was just frightened by the power outage?"

"Di isn't that wimpy, Trix," Honey replied. "But we'd better be careful. She may be hurt."

"Well, we can't stand around talking. Let's get going." Trixie pulled Honey toward the doorway that connected the den to the main hallway. Just as she was about to dart into the hall, she caught a whiff of cigarette smoke, and stopped short. Raising a finger to her lips, she tried to signal silence to Honey.

As usual, Honey seemed to understand her best friend without needing to speak, and the two girls shrank against the wall while trying to peer into the dark hall. The minutes ticked by as Trixie imagined possible scenarios that explained the scream. She felt ready to scream herself before, finally, heavy footsteps created a slight vibration as a man walked from the direction of the kitchen toward the front of the house. Trixie could just make out his white shirt and a glint of gold from his badge. A wave of relief washed over her – it was the guard. She was about to step out into the hall to greet him when a flash of lightning revealed that the man was hulking, stoop-shouldered, and wearing a Ronald Regan mask.

This was no guard. Trixie had seen the security staff, and this man did not fit the profile of any of the men who had been working the party.

“Don’t move,” Honey barely whispered the command. She had seen, too. The two girls shrank against the wall and tried not to breathe at all. Trixie willed the man not to enter the den, and wished she had a flashlight or something – anything – else to use for a defensive weapon ... just in case.

Miraculously, the masked man glided past the door, and as soon as his steps had completely faded away, the two girls moved noiselessly out of the den and headed in the opposite direction.

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Dan sat in the car for a long moment, watching the dark and silent house. His hands were still shaking from the near miss with the tree, his heart still thudding uncomfortably in his chest. Taking a deep breath, he cast a quick look up the blocked drive, and focused on the mansion. Not a single ray of light broke the unrelenting darkness. He turned off the car and pocketed the key. Sliding out the door, he was careful not to slam it. Every nerve in his body was on high alert, stretching and sensing for danger.

With one hand on the car, Dan peered through the rain, looking and listening for a clue as to what was bothering him. Was something wrong, or was he just reacting to an overdose of adrenaline? *Maybe they’re messing with me*, he thought. It wouldn’t be unusual for Trixie and Mart to come up with a prank to get back at him for leaving them with most of the clean up. Still, something just felt ... off.

Reaching into the car, Dan grabbed his black cape and tossed it over his wide rimmed hat, pulling the edges together around his face as he moved slowly toward the house. If this was some sort of joke, maybe he could scare the perpetrators in return. And, if something was truly wrong, well, making himself less visible in the night couldn’t hurt.

The door opened silently at his touch, he didn’t even need to turn the knob. The entryway was pitch dark, the air heavy and still with a faintly familiar odor. As Dan stepped across the threshold, his foot slipped and he fell forward, catching himself with his right hand. His hand came up wet and sticky, and Dan lifted it to his face,

sniffing. As the musky, coppery scent assaulted his nose, lightning flashed and lit the room, and he realized that the floor and his hand were smeared with blood. Dan lurched to his feet, eyes darting all around as he backed out the door. He had to get help, but how? Where?

*Skreeeeek.* The porch boards squealed, and Dan turned toward the noise, only to be hit broadside by a flying body. The two tumbled to the ground, landing in a heap and rolling across the rain-soaked lawn. Dan looked up just as another lightning bolt shattered the night sky, revealing Jim Frayne as the attacker straddling him.

“Jim? What’s going on?”

“Dan?” Jim stopped, his fist frozen in mid-air. “I thought... I... you... Sorry.” His hand loosened and dropped to his side as he rolled off of his friend. “I thought you were Jonesy.”

“Jonesy?” Dan scrambled to his feet and extended a hand up to Jim. “What are you talking about?”

“He’s back, Dan,” Jim intoned flatly. “I’m sure of it. Jonesy’s here, and he’s looking for revenge.”

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They were back in the car, hunkered down out of the rain, out of sight of the house, trying to come up with a plan.

“The driveway is blocked,” Dan told Jim. “It would take a chainsaw and time to clear it, and the blood on the floor isn’t good.” He held out his stained hand, and Jim shuddered.

“We have to think of something,” Jim worried. “Jonesy doesn’t have anything to lose. He’ll hurt them just to get to me.”

“Are you sure it’s Jonesy?” Dan asked. “He’s supposed to be in jail. If he’d been paroled, they would have let you know.”

“I’m sure.” Jim looked away. “I’d know his tobacco anywhere.”

“A lot of jerks smoke.” Dan pointed out.

“Jonesy rolls his own.” Jim held out his hand. “He also likes these.”

Dan looked at the items in the outstretched, freckled hand. A half-smoked, hand-rolled cigarette and a plastic zip tie. Gingerly, he picked up the butt and sniffed it, his eyes closing as his own unpleasant memories flooded over him. He dropped it quickly and repeated, “A lot of jerks smoke. What’s with the tie?”

“He tied my wrists together with three of these.” Jim pushed up the sleeve of his black costume shirt, showing Dan the raw marks of his recent restraint, a plastic tie still wrapped snugly around the wrist. “When he tied me to the bed that last time, he used these things. They dig in, and they’re hard to get out of without a knife or scissors.”

“How’d you get free?” Dan asked, searching for his pocketknife.

“He tied my hands in front this time, and my legs were free. I chewed through the center tie.” Jim held out his wrists so Dan could slice through the plastic with his blade. “Thanks.”

Dan just nodded. “Why would Jonesy leave you tied up? Why didn’t he just take you with him? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Jonesy rarely makes sense.” Jim chewed on his lip, strain etched across his forehead. “All I know for sure is that he’s in there with my sister and my friends, and I need to take him out.”

“*We* need to take him out,” Dan corrected. “I’m not convinced it’s really him, but it doesn’t matter. *Someone* is in there threatening our family, and we need to rescue them.”

“We can’t do it from out here, either.” Jim peered up and out the window. “I think we need to get back inside, find a phone to call for help, and make sure Jonesy hasn’t hurt anyone.”

Dan held up his bloodstained hand. “Someone’s already been

hurt,” he said grimly. “Maybe we can start by following the blood. Hopefully, whoever it is isn't hurt too badly.”

Jim nodded. “I still have my flashlight. There's an emergency light in the glove box that you can use, and Dan?” His friend looked at him as lightning split the night again, casting an eerie glow on the two pale faces. “Bring your knife, just in case.”

Stealthily, the two slipped from the car and made their way back to the house.

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Diana winced as she stumbled, tripping over her own feet on the thickly-carpeted stairs. Cruel fingers dug into her upper arm, and she couldn't stop the small whimper from escaping her lips.

“Careful, little lady,” her captor sneered as he dragged her up the stairs. “Wouldn't want you to trip and fall, now would we?”

Mart's eyes blazed. “Keep your hands off her,” he demanded.

“Or what?” Bull taunted.

Mart struggled uselessly against the zip ties that secured his wrists firmly behind his back.

“Careful, Mart,” Brian urged, his voice low.

Mart knew that Brian was referring to more than just cutting his wrists on the ties. It was important that they not antagonize the bad guy. At least, not yet.

When they reached the top of the flight of stairs, Bull led them unerringly down the dark corridor until they reached the twins' nursery. He stood with his back to the closed door, surveying the three youths huddled close together. With a sneer, he noted that the younger Belden brother, the blond one, was doing his best to comfort the raven-haired beauty. Puppy love, he thought scornfully, then paused to wonder if his son had feelings for any of the girls in this



gang. The black-haired beauty and the girl with honey-colored hair were lookers, all right. But the blonde spit-fire looked like she commanded a fair bit of attention, herself.

Not that it mattered. After tonight, his son would have a new set of friends. A new family.

“Well, don't just stand there,” Bull snarled. “Make yourselves at home.”

The three youths exchanged uneasy looks.

“You're going to be here for a while,” Bull continued, his quiet voice filled with venom. A cruel sneer curved his lips as he watched the girl, the Lynch brat, glance at the phone in the play area of the nursery. “It won't do you any good,” he said, removing the wire cutters from his pocket and waving them in front of their faces. “There seems to have been an accident with the phone line.”

He watched the blood drain from her already paleface. “And you won't have much luck with cell phones, either,” he continued, shaking the small bag he'd been carrying with him. “It really is too bad,” he taunted. “Miss Lynch has top-of-the-line equipment here.” He fingered the violet phone. “But, then again, *all* the phones here are high-quality.” He removed each phone, watching the horror spread on their faces as they recognized that not only did he have Diana's cell phone, he had also commandeered Miss Trask's, Regan's, and Jim's phones. There was no way to communicate with the outside world.

Mart tried to telegraph reassurance to his girlfriend, but Diana seemed to have retreated into a terrified trance.

“Down on the floor, you,” the fake security guard snarled, pointing his gun at Brian. Brian lay down, but Mart could sense what he was going to do. Sure enough, when the thug began to bind his ankles with plastic zip ties – a task which required both hands – Brian kicked out. The man dodged his kick and received only a glancing blow to his shoulder.

“Try that again, buddy, and your little lady friend will suffer for

it.” He pointed his revolver at Diana, and Mart saw her turn even paler than before. Brian subsided immediately, and in minutes all three of them were tied up, with toilet tissue gags choking them.

Their captor dumped the cell phones back into the bag. “Enough chit chat. I have a date with two pretty little girls.” He watched with amusement as both the blond and the brunette males flushed with anger and pulled at their restraints.

“I’ll be back soon,” Bull promised. The burly man’s Reagan mask didn’t change expression, but Mart was sure his lips were curled in a sneer. “Play nicely, now,” he said, slipping out the nursery door and locking it behind him.

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Jim pointed the thin stream of light down towards the floor, shielding it with his hand in an attempt to deflect any stray light escaping. In silent sync, he and Dan followed the rusty streaks of blood across the parquet floor.

A creak above their heads stopped both boys cold. Something, or someone, was moving around upstairs. Eyes met, and the two resumed their trek with grim determination and extra caution.

The trail ended at the coat closet off the gallery entrance. Jim raised the light and Dan carefully reached for the door handle. The door pulled open without so much as a squeak, and the light reflected off of a still and pale hand.

“Mr. Williams,” Jim breathed. He dropped down, his free hand searching for signs of life.

“Is he...?” Dan couldn’t finish the question.

“He’s alive,” Jim whispered in relief. “But he’s bleeding pretty badly.” He shined the light on the unconscious guard. “Someone hit him pretty hard – he’s probably concussed.”

“Why is he undressed?” Dan queried almost silently. Sure

enough, Mr. Williams lay on the closet floor, bound and gagged in his boxers, t-shirt and socks.

“Jonesy.” Jim shook his head. “That’s why he was wearing the mask.”

“What are you talking about?” Dan demanded in sotto voice. “What mask?” He knelt next to Jim, his fingers working to loosen the gag tied around the unconscious man’s mouth.

“The guard told Brian and me that you had a flat and Harrison had cut himself. He was wearing one of those Ronald Reagan masks. It was Jonesy, and I never guessed.” Guilt and anger warred with fear and disgust in Jim’s voice.

“Well, my knife isn’t much use against these cuffs,” Dan whispered. “We’ll have to leave him for now.” As he moved to rise, his hand brushed across something rough. “What...?”

Jim pointed the pen light in the direction Dan had indicated. Pinned to the shoulder of Mr. Williams’ shirt was a blood spattered note. In bold letters, it read, **“YOU CAN RUN BOY. YOU CAN’T HIDE”**.

With a muffled gasp, Dan pulled back. Jim looked at him with surprise, but Dan’s face was implacable. “We should keep searching,” he said flatly. “Find the others before whoever’s upstairs comes downstairs.”

Jim nodded his agreement, rising to his feet. Leaving the closet door ajar, they moved quietly towards the den.

This time, Dan entered first. A flash of lightning showed them that the room was empty, but evidence of the intruder spilled from the eviscerated sofa. Dan turned on his own light, revealing the slashed fabric oozing foam and fluff. A red velvet throw pillow was propped in the corner, a note stuck to it with a silver fork. With hands that trembled, Dan removed the note. Familiar block letters seemed to shout, **“YOU OWE ME BOY. I OWN YOU.”**

“Jonesy.” Jim took the note from Dan, his mouth a tight, grim line. “I don’t owe you anything, you bastard.”

Dan licked dry lips. “Jim,” he started to say, only to be stopped by his friend’s upraised hand.

“Shhh!” Jim hissed. “Do you hear that?”

Sure enough, the ceiling creaked again, and the sound of heavy feet on the plushly carpeted upstairs hall focused their attention on the matter at hand.

“Kitchen,” Dan rasped. “If he took out Harrison, it was probably in the kitchen.” Jim nodded his agreement, and they were once again back on the hunt.

It took far too long to reach their destination. Every creak and squeak had them frozen in their tracks, waiting. It was a great relief when they finally entered the spacious, albeit blacked out kitchen. Shining their flashlight beams around the room, it was obvious that a struggle had occurred. An overturned chair leaned on the stainless steel stove, and the normally pristine floor was strewn with the shattered remains of a porcelain cow cookie jar, its once tasty contents crushed and scattered.

A low moan sounded from the butler’s pantry, and both Jim and Dan moved toward the origin of the noise. Cautiously, they entered, flashlights in hand, Dan’s pocketknife open and clutched tight.

As light reflected off the face of the Lynch family butler, the fear on Harrison’s face turned to relief. Both boys dropped down before the prostrate man, Jim reaching for the napkin gag even as Dan slid his blade through the plastic ties binding Harrison’s wrists and ankles.

“Harrison, are you okay? What happened to everyone?” Dan asked the questions in a hushed voice.

Harrison answered in equally soft tones. “I was hit from

behind. I didn't see him, but he got both Mart and Brian before I could warn them. And Miss Diana... I heard her scream, but..." He tried to get up. "I must find her."

"Whoa!" Jim whispered, his hand firm on the butler's arm. "Take it slow. We'll find them. What about Trixie and Honey? Did he get them, too?"

"I don't know," Harrison admitted. "I don't know who he is, or what he wants."

"I do." Jim scowled. "It's Jonesy."

"I'm not so sure about that." Dan's voice was pained, his expression guarded as he pointed to the tin of tobacco on the counter just above Harrison's head. Hanging from the empty, stinking tin was another note, with the all too familiar print. It read,

**"DADDY'S BACK."**

## ***Part 4***

Trussed up like Thanksgiving turkeys, the three captives in the nursery couldn't even grind their teeth in frustration because of the wads of toilet tissue stuffed into their mouths as gags. Mart set himself to thinking of a plan for somehow freeing themselves. With his ear to the floor, he felt the vibrations of the quiet, if heavy, tread becoming fainter and fainter. Presumably, Williams had gone back downstairs. Despite his own fear, Mart felt a burning curiosity about the man's reason for entering the Lynch home when so many people were present. It didn't make sense.

*Unless, of course, he was after one of the Bob-Whites.*

*And it's all for one, and one for all,* Mart reminded himself. *We've got to get free, so we can help the others.* He glanced at his companions. Brian had scooted himself close to a floor register and was methodically rubbing his wrist ties across the metal louvers, but Mart knew there was no way the louvers could cut through the sturdy

plastic in time. Diana, suddenly freed from her trance, was inching along like a caterpillar on her back, making her way to the bathroom on the boys' side of the playroom. Her lips were folded together in determination. Even in the darkness, Mart could see her dark brows drawn together in the way that meant she was trying hard to figure out a problem. He wondered, with a flicker of hope, what she was up to.

For his own part, Mart tried to think of a more effective cutting tool than the floor register. *If I could just get my hands out in front of me*, he thought. But his arms were either too short, or they were twisted so that he couldn't slide himself through them. *There is absolutely nothing sharp in this room*, he decided, and began to work the ties back and forth, trying to wear down the teeth so that they would be able to loosen up.

Mart was concentrating so hard on loosening the ties that he didn't even see Diana work herself into a kneeling position and pull the vanity drawer open with her lips. Unable to see into the drawer, she backed up to the toilet and used her elbows to leverage her weight until she was standing, although with uncertain balance. Once, twice, three times, she reached backward into the drawer, finally fitting her fingers into the rings of a pair of nail scissors. Her mission accomplished, she dropped awkwardly to her knees again and inched her way back to Mart.

Mart's eyes were glued to Diana's purposeful movements, and a bubble of excitement rose in his chest as he saw the glint of a pair of scissors in her hand. After several attempts at cutting his bonds, she was able to transfer the scissors to him. Mart, in turn, struggled to use the scissors on her ties. It was just impossible to get the right position, he decided in frustration, dropping the scissors for the third time.

By this time, Brian had noticed that his brother and Di were in possession of a tool, and he scooted himself over to them. Diana managed to transfer the instrument to him, and Brian, who had practiced suturing over the summer, finally gained enough of a grip and the right cutting angle to sever her ties.

The second Di's hands were freed, she used a finger to hook the sodden toilet tissue gag, retching a little as she tossed the mess toward the bathroom. Then she took the scissors from Brian and cut the ties binding his and Mart's hands. They rid themselves of their gags and freed their feet as well as hers.

"Great work, Di!" Mart was careful to whisper, but he made sure to let his normally timid girlfriend know how proud he was.

"Now we need to get back downstairs and find Trixie, Honey, and Jim," Brian said. "Dan should have been back by now, too. They're all in danger."

"We need to do that without giving our unfriendly visitor a clue that we're free again," Mart reminded him. "How can we do that, Di? Or can we do it at all?"

Diana's head was bowed in thought, and her black hair fell across her face like a curtain. Finally she looked back up at the brothers. "I know a way. Come with me."

The three tiptoed back to the far end of the nursery wing's playroom. A locked door in the center of the end wall stopped them.

"This door leads to a private staircase that was intended for the staff's use, coming and going," Diana explained in a whisper. "Larry and Terry were using it to sneak outside at night, so Daddy walled off a space close to the landing and added a door with a deadbolt lock. The staff have keys, but now the boys can't get out this way."

"How is this helping us?" Mart whispered back. "We don't have a key."

"Brian, reach up to the top of the doorframe," Diana murmured. "The boys don't know it but Daddy put an extra key up there, in case of emergency." Her face wore the ghost of a smile. "This is an emergency if there ever was one."

Brian's fingers brushed against the key, and in a moment the trio had unlocked the door and were creeping silently down a flight of

stairs. "The stairway leads to a short hallway behind the kitchen," Diana explained softly. "So we'll have to be careful to scope out the kitchen, in case Mr. President is in there."

Jim winced as he caught the lingering scent of tobacco smoke in the air. His tongue prickled and, for a brief moment, he could actually taste the smell. The smell that had haunted him through long years of torture before he came to Sleepyside. The smell that had seemed to linger in his clothes for long days after he finally ran away. The urge to purge his body of the stench was strong. Instead, Jim straightened and turned steely green eyes towards his friend.

"Jonesy is behind this. And we're ending this tonight."

Dan's dark eyes were troubled as he stared at the tobacco tin. "Jonesy isn't the only jerk who smokes."

Jim stared at him incredulously. "Dan. How many people do you know who smoke this crap, and who would want revenge on one of us? How many people who would call one of us his son?"

"I can think of at least one more," Dan replied quietly.

Jim stilled, fighting to suppress the panic that he felt at the thought of Jonesy in the house, taking revenge on his friends. He frowned, unable to account for Dan's words.

"You know I was in a gang," Dan said, his voice tightly controlled. "What you don't know is how I got into the gang. Or, rather, *who* got me into the gang." His mouth tightened. "My...step-father...was not a nice man."

Jim blinked. "You...your step-father..."

Dan nodded, eyes firmly fixed on the tobacco tin. "Yeah."

"He smoked that stuff, too?" Jim asked.

Dan nodded. "And he had a thing about people leaving the gang. It's a betrayal. He didn't like being betrayed."

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“I still think it's Jonesy,” Jim finally said after a few moments of silence.

“Doesn't much matter who it is,” Dan shrugged. “The only thing that matters is stopping him.”

“I quite agree.” Both young men jumped at the sound of a third voice. “It's high time that we put a stop to this nonsense.”

“Harrison!” Jim exclaimed. “Are you okay?”

The elderly butler shook his head dismissively. “I've taken worse knocks.” He rolled up the sleeves of his rumpled white shirt. “Now, what we need is a plan,” he said, his voice calm and steady. “We'll need to separate in order to find the other Bob-Whites.”

Dan nodded. “Okay. I'll...” He stopped as he realized that he had no idea where to start looking. The only rooms of the Lynch Estate he was familiar with were on the main level, and it was clear that neither their friends nor the man stalking them were in any of those rooms. He knew that there were bedrooms upstairs, but he'd never actually seen them.

“Perhaps I should check the upstairs,” Harrison offered. “And you young men could explore the basement.”

Jim frowned. “I don't like the idea of you going upstairs by yourself, Harrison. What if--”

“I'm familiar with the layout of the rooms,” the elderly butler interjected. “I assure you that I can move quickly and quietly. Whoever is up there won't know that I'm there unless I want them to.” He smiled, white teeth flashing in the darkened room. “If there's one thing I've learned, it's how to be invisible.”

Jim nodded reluctantly, following Harrison and Dan as the butler led them to the staircase that would take them to the basement. “Good luck,” Harrison whispered before slipping away noiselessly.

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Dan led the way down the staircase, trying to move as silently as the butler had. Instead, he heard every creak, every groan under his feet. The knowledge that something deadly was terrorizing his friends was like a heavy weight around his neck and in the pit of his stomach. And it was as if the fear of who it could be made *him* heavier, clumsier.

Without a word, the two young men explored the darkened basement. Frequent flashes of lightning illuminated enough of the unfinished space that they could see the locations of the hot water tank and furnace. It didn't take long for them to determine that they were alone.

Jim grunted in frustration. "What I wouldn't give to have my phone back," he muttered. "For all we know, the others have managed to escape, and are waiting for us back at the Manor House. Or Harrison could have located everyone. Or--"

"Stop it," Dan ordered, a trifle more harshly than he had intended. "Your phone's gone. So is Harrison's. So is everyone else's, probably. We'll have to make do."

He stared at the room, not seeing anything. "I think we should go upstairs and see how Harrison is making out."

Jim nodded and started back toward the staircase. "If Harrison hasn't found anyone, then we know that we'll have to look outside the house. And, if he *has* found someone..."

"He might need help," Dan finished grimly.

Jim nodded.

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Harrison crept up the steps, ignoring the throbbing of his head. Years of practice in moving unobtrusively stood him in good stead. He glided down the main hallway, feeling more like a wraith than a flesh-and-blood man. He paused outside the first door, listening intently for sounds coming from the guest bedroom.

Nothing.

The door swung silently open when he gave it a gentle nudge, and he thanked his lucky stars that he had recently seen to the oiling of the hinges. Though the room had the unmistakable aura of having been in disuse for a very long time, he took the time to check in the closet and under the bed.

Empty.

Harrison listened intently before returning the hallway, but the only break in the silence was the heavy roll of thunder. He slipped into the next bedroom, and then another. Both were silent were empty. Where *was* everyone?

\* \* \*

Trixie grabbed Honey's hand in a knee-jerk reaction as they tried to sneak through the darkened house. "Shhh," she hissed, pulling her against the wall. They waited, listening intently for any sounds.

"Did you hear something?" Honey finally whispered.

Trixie gnawed her bottom lip. "I don't know. It was probably just thunder..." She squinted into the darkness, but couldn't see anything unusual. "We have to find the others," she said, her voice serious. "They might need...help."

Honey paled, realizing that Trixie meant that their friends might need *medical* help.

"And we have to find that man," Trixie continued, her voice laced with determination. Her blue eyes clouded. "Did you smell that cigarette smoke?" she asked.

Trixie waited while Honey struggled to make the connection.

"Jonesy!" she breathed.

Trixie nodded soberly. "I hope it's not, but..."

Honey's hands started to shake. "Oh, Trixie, this isn't good. Poor Jim..."

Trixie swallowed hard and squeezed Honey's hand. "I'm sure he's fine," she said, but her voice lacked confidence. "He *has* to be," she finished.

"We should try the kitchen," Honey reminded her.

Both girls paused. Diana had disappeared after venturing to the kitchen...

"We'll be careful," Trixie said in an attempt to reassure her best friend. "It'll be fine."

Honey's face was pinched with worry, but she nodded. The two girls crept down the hall as silently as they could, and made their way slowly to the kitchen. Because they stopped every few feet to listen, it seemed to take hours to reach the state-of-the-art room.

"It looks empty," Honey whispered from the doorway.

Trixie pointed at the obvious mess. "Harrison would never leave the kitchen looking like this. Unless it was an emergency."

"Or unless..." Honey couldn't finish the statement.

"We have to check and make sure there's no one in here," Trixie said, summoning her courage. Together, the two girls scoured every inch of the kitchen and butler's pantry, waiting for flashes of lightning to provide illumination. They found signs of a struggle, but nothing else. When they were finished, Trixie shrugged.

"I guess we should try upstairs," she said.

They ascended the staircase, pausing often to listen, but neither girl heard anything. When they reached the top of the landing, however, Trixie stopped suddenly. "Did you see that?" she hissed, her eyes wide.

Honey peered into the darkness. “No. What?” she whispered back, tendrils of dread curling in her stomach.

“I saw something in the shadows.” Trixie pointed to the far end of the hallway.

Honey frowned. “How could you see anything? It's pitch-black up here.”

Trixie shrugged. “Something was there, and then it wasn't.” She grabbed her friend's hand and hustled her down the hall.

“Wait,” Honey begged, stopping short. “What if it's...?”

Trixie's expression hardened. “If ~~if~~ Honey we'll find a way to make him stop,” she said. “He's *not* going to get away with this.” With those words she took off toward the spot she thought she had seen something, and Honey was forced to follow.

When they reached the end of the hall, though, they found nothing. Trixie sighed in frustration. “We need to check all the rooms,” she decided.

Honey nodded. They searched the master bedroom, Diana's suite, and two guest rooms before approaching the nursery. As soon as they opened the door, they both smelled it.

“He was here.” Trixie's eyes snapped with anger. “He was in the nursery.”

Honey nodded, her nose wrinkling in distaste at the cloying stench of cigarette smoke. “It's vile,” she said. “I can't imagine why anyone would want to smell like that all the time.”

Trixie nodded absently. “Yeah. It's disgusting, all right.”

A flash of lightning drew their attention to the window. They stared into the dark night, watching the trees bend in the breeze.

“Isn't that the Bob-White station wagon?” Honey asked pointing to a vehicle parked on the driveway, a fair distance from the house.

Trixie nodded, squinting into the darkness. “Why would they leave the car there after they changed the tire?” she wondered. “Honey, look! Isn't that a tree on the driveway?”

Honey covered her mouth. “Oh, Trixie! You don't think Dan's hurt, do you?”

Trixie worried her bottom lip between her teeth. “It doesn't look as if the tree struck the wagon,” she said.

“Then where's Dan?” Honey wondered.

Trixie's blue eyes clouded with worry. “I don't know, Honey. I don't know.”

The girls moved further into the room. When they reached the attached bathroom, both girls sucked in their breath. A pile of zip ties and a pair of nail scissors were in a messy pile on the counter.

Honey bit her lip. “This isn't good.”

Trixie studied the pile thoughtfully. “Yes, it is. Whoever was tied up, isn't anymore.”

“Unless someone managed to tie up Jonesy. Or whoever is doing this,” Honey pointed out.

Trixie shook her head. “If any of the Bob-Whites had captured Jonesy, they wouldn't have used zip ties. A belt, maybe. Or a necktie. Whoever used the zip ties brought them with him.”

Honey's reply was cut short by the sound of a door further down the hallway closing. “Quick! Hide!”

They huddled against the wall of the nursery, beside the doorway. Honey had wanted to hide behind the door, but Trixie

pointed out that, this way, they would be able to see whoever came into the room, or walked past. Behind the door, they wouldn't be able to see anyone who continued down the hallway.

Both girls sucked in breaths when they saw the stoop shouldered man glide past the door. Trixie was about to follow him when Honey grabbed her arm and shook her head frantically. Trixie's frown of irritation disappeared when she saw what Honey was trying to point out to her.

A flash of lightning lit the hall and clearly showed the ugly revolver in the man's hand.

The two girls shrank back against the wall and waited, hoping that they wouldn't be noticed.

"We need help," Honey whispered when they were certain that the man was out of hearing. "I'll call the police..." Her voice trailed off as she remembered that neither of them had a cell phone, and that the land lines were down. She closed her eyes. "What are we going to do, Trix?"

Trixie shook her head. "Wait. Do you hear that?"

Both girls listened intently. They could hear furtive footsteps, coming from the opposite direction that the stoop-shouldered man had gone.

"What if he has an accomplice?" Honey whispered.

They shrank further into the dark room, hoping to remain unnoticed.

\* \* \*

"I'm telling you, I heard something," Jim insisted.

The two young men stopped at the top of the staircase. "I heard it, too," Dan agreed, his voice low. They both strained to listen more closely, noting the sound of light footsteps.

“Not Jonesy,” Jim muttered, still listening intently. “He was like smoke. You could never hear him until he was on top of you.”

Dan nodded. “Makes it easier to terrorize someone.” He winced at his own words, picturing what could be happening to his friends, the people he considered to be his family.

They began moving quietly down the hallway, pausing often to listen, but hearing no other sounds. Jim halted when they reached an open door. “I’m sure this is where the sound came from,” he mouthed.

They entered the room slowly, taking in the scattered toys and low beds. When they were halfway into the room, they heard muffled exclamations and saw two forms pull away from the wall.

“Trixie! Honey!” Jim and Dan recognized the girls immediately.

“Are you okay?” Jim demanded, green eyes blazing. “Did he hurt you?”

The girls shook their heads emphatically. “We’re fine,” Trixie assured him, while Honey threw her arms around her brother.

“Where are the others?” Dan demanded. “Are they with you? Are they okay?”

Honey’s face fell. “We can’t find them,” she said, her voice thick with unshed tears. “But we did find something...” Honey brightened as she remembered the zip ties and nail scissors they had discovered in the bathroom.

“We think they were tied up, but managed to get free,” Trixie said, showing them what they had discovered.

Jim nodded. “He used zip ties to bind me, too.”

Trixie’s eyes burned as she thought about Jim being cuffed. “Jim...”



“I'm fine,” he said, shooting her a crooked grin. “Or, I will be once we find the others and take care of our stalker.”

“I think it's Jonesy,” Trixie blurted. “I'm sorry Jim.”

Jim ground his teeth. “Did you see him?”

“Yes. Kind of. I think.”

Dan and Jim both raised their eyebrows.

“We saw someone,” Honey explained. “It was too dark to really tell for certain, but...”

“But we smelled the cigarette smoke,” Trixie finished. She searched Jim's face for a reaction, but could see very little in the dark.

Jim nodded grimly. “I knew it was him.” He exchanged a glance with Dan.

“It's not necessarily him,” Dan reminded him. “We shouldn't jump to conclusions.”

Trixie frowned. “What are you talking about, Dan?”

Dan took a deep breath before explaining, “My...step-father smoked the same cigarettes,” he said, tripping over the word step-father, his loathing evident. “It's possible he came here for me. To get me to return to the Cowhands.”

Trixie sucked in a breath. “No!”

“Do you have any idea where the others are?” Jim interrupted.

Honey shook her head sadly. “We were looking for everyone up here. So far, you're the only ones we've found.”

“Then we'd better keep looking,” Dan said.

\* \* \* \*

Harrison patted his pocket, searching for the keys he always kept on his person. When he couldn't immediately locate it, he ran a hand along the upper edge of the doorframe. Missing. He hesitated. Out of the people in the house, only Diana knew about the existence of the key. Did that mean that Diana had attempted the back staircase? Or had the stalker somehow managed to find it?

Ultimately, it didn't matter. Harrison was determined to find his young charges *and* the stalker. He settled his hand on the doorknob and was surprised when it swung open, revealing the back stair case leading to the kitchen. Diana had failed to lock the door behind her.

He crept silently, running his hand along the polished banister. Sound echoed in the enclosed space, and sometimes it sounded as if other footsteps echoed, as well. Was there someone below him on the stairs? He slowed his pace, unable to see anything in the intense dark of the windowless stairwell.

Counting the stairs, he came to a stop four steps from the bottom. He was almost certain that someone else was close by.

"Stop," a firm voice demanded.

Harrison's grip on the banister tightened. "Brian?" he asked.

Four people blew out sighs of relief.

"Harrison? Is that you? Are you okay?" Diana demanded.

"I'm fine," he assured them. "But what about you?"

"Nothing that won't heal," Mart said grimly, thinking of his sore throat, and the cuts on his wrists. "But we don't know anything about the others."

"Jim and Dan are fine," Harrison assured them. "The last I saw them, they were checking the basement." He frowned, realizing that the young men had had plenty of time to search the open area. "Do we

know where Trixie and Honey are?”

Diana's voice trembled. “I left them in the den, but they aren't there anymore.”

“I'm sure they're fine,” Mart said, drawing her close. “You know Trixie and Honey.”

“Yeah,” she sniffed. “I do. I know that they always get themselves kidnapped.” Diana bit her tongue, ashamed of herself for giving into fear. A lone tear tracked down her face as she turned to Trixie's brothers. “I'm sorry.”

Brian patted her shoulder awkwardly in the dark, enclosed space. “Everything is going to be fine, Di. We'll find them.”

“Yes, we will,” Harrison said, his voice firm. “Jim and Dan are looking for them, too.”

“Then we should join forces,” Brian said. “Where are Jim and Dan now?”

Harrison looked at the door of the staircase that led to the kitchen. “They should be finished searching the basement. Perhaps we can catch them on their way up.”

They eyed the door. “I never thought I'd say this,” Mart muttered, “but I really don't want to go in that kitchen.”

Harrison reached for the doorknob. The door swung open silently. All four gazed into the dark and deserted kitchen. Harrison winced at the wreckage, and then approached the butler's pantry. Empty.

“The basement?” Brian asked.

The four again followed Harrison, and quickly determined that the basement was also empty.

“Dan and Jim must have gone upstairs,” Mart said.

Harrison nodded. "We'll check the rest of the main level, then head upstairs."

They entered the family room, casting furtive glances over their shoulders.

\* \* \* \* \*

"We have to find the others," Trixie stated. "We heard Diana scream a little while ago, but we haven't been able to find her."

"Harrison's looking for them, too," Jim assured her. "But I haven't seen Miss Trask or Regan in ages."

Honey bit her bottom lip. "What do we do?" she asked, turning to her big brother.

"We find Harrison," Jim answered, trying to sound calmer than he felt. "He knows the house the best out of all of us."

Dan nodded. "And he should be on this floor somewhere. He was going to search the upstairs while we did the basement."

"We haven't seen him," Honey said.

Dan shrugged. "I don't think Harrison is really seen unless he wants to be."

"Still, I'd feel better if we were all together," Trixie said, blue eyes clouded with worry.

Jim nodded. "Safety in numbers. I'm sure we'll find everyone soon--" His voice trailed off as they heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps on the level below them.

"I thought Harrison was up here," Honey whispered.

"That sounds like more than one person," Jim pointed out.

“Jonesy?” Trixie asked.

No one answered.

Dan took a deep breath. “It doesn't matter. If it's the Bob-Whites, we want to meet up with them. If it's... him, well, we need to deal with him, too.”

Before the girls could blink, the boys were out of the room and heading toward the stairs.

“Stay here,” Dan hissed, just before he disappeared. “We need to be able to find you.”

Trixie planted her hands on her hips. “Well, how do you like that? Do they really think that we'll just stay here and wait for them?”

Honey sighed. “Let's give them a few minutes,” she suggested. “I really don't want to get separated again...”

Trixie sighed. The boys were out of sight already.

\* \* \*

“I hear someone on the steps,” Diana hissed as they crept through the family room.

They all listened intently, and heard the unmistakable creaking of stairs. Brian reacted quickly, pulling all of them behind a sofa and forcing them to crouch.

“It's more than one person,” Mart stated.

Diana shuddered. “Do you think there's more than one bad guy?” she asked, clutching Mart's arm.

He covered her hand with his before replying. “We don't have any reason to think he's not alone.”

“But we don't know.”

Mart shook his head. "We'll just have to be careful."

Harrison made a shushing sound as dark shadows appeared in the doorway of the family room. Two figures stole into the room, pausing often, as if they were looking for something, or someone. When they moved closer to the sofa, Brian let out a sigh of relief.

"Jim. Dan." Brian stood up slowly, trying not to frighten his friends.

"Brian!" Jim passed a hand over his eyes. "Thank goodness. Are the others with you?"

Mart, Diana, and Harrison stood and the six moved to the middle of the room.

"Are either of you hurt?" Brian demanded, squinting at his friends.

"We're fine," Dan said. "You guys?"

Mart nodded impatiently. "What do we do now?" he demanded. "We need to figure out who this bad guy is, and what he wants."

Jim and Dan exchanged glances.

"It's Jonesy," Jim said quietly.

"Maybe," Dan retorted. "We don't know that for sure."

"Wait," Brian interjected, stopping what he could see was a source of escalating tension between his friends. "Jim, what makes you think Jonesy is behind this?"

"The cigarette smoke. The zip ties. The notes." Jim ticked off his reasons on his hand.

"What notes?" Mart interrupted.

"We've found a few notes. Someone is looking to get his son back," Dan said. "And it might not be Jonesy."

"As I believe we've already established," Harrison said, "it doesn't matter. The important thing is to get everyone together and get out of here before someone gets hurt."

They nodded. "Where are Honey and Trixie?" Brian asked, gripping Jim's arm. "Have you seen them?"

"They're in the nursery," Jim said.

"Then we need to get them, and get out of here as quickly as possible," Harrison repeated.

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"Dan and I'll go," Jim volunteered. "The rest of you get out. We can meet at the stable."

"No," Brian argued. "There's only one of him... I think. We're stronger together."

Jim opened his mouth to disagree, but his words were halted by a thud and a short, sharp scream. "That was Honey!" he exclaimed, turning toward the sound.

Harrison grabbed his arm pulling him aside. "Wait!" he instructed. "You can't rush up there. We go carefully, or we don't go at all."

"Uh, gentlemen?" Dan interjected. "It's too late."

Sure enough, Brian, Mart and Diana had already turned the hall corner and were heading toward the nursery. Harrison swore under his breath, a most un-butler-like incident that would have brought a smile to Dan's face had the situation not been so dire. "Wait here," he said firmly, stepping toward the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" Dan asked.

"We have a pocketknife and two small flashlights," Harrison

stated. "I'm going to find a weapon." With that he was gone, leaving Jim and Dan alone in the shadows.

"We aren't waiting." Jim said the words flatly.

"Can't," Dan acknowledged. "But we can't let him see us, either."

They slipped stealthily up the stairs and down the hall, senses alert to the slightest sound or flicker of light. As they approached the nursery, the eerie silence was shattered by a single gunshot, followed by a low, evil laugh. Hearts racing, both boys dropped to their hands and knees, crawling desperately for the door.

The nursery was dim, the only light coming from four battery operated ceramic jack-o-lanterns sitting on the windowsills, casting a flickering glow across a horrifying scene. A large, stoop shouldered man in a Ronald Reagan mask held Honey close to his body, his left arm snug against her throat, the pistol in his right hand pointed at her temple. Trixie was sprawled at his feet, her hands and feet tightly bound with zip ties, her eyes wide with fear and staring at Brian, Mart and Diana who were backed up against the opposite wall. The masked man laughed again, the sound sending shivers down Dan's back.

He looked at Jim as the man called out in a sing-song falsetto, "One little, two little, three little, four little, five. But not the one I want alive. Hey, boy! I know you're out there. Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

Jim's green eyes were bleak as he looked at Dan. Slowly, he rose to his feet, shaking off Dan's attempt to stop him. Taking a deep breath, the husky red head stepped through the door. "Let them go, Jonesy. I'm right here."

The big man turned, dragging a terrified Honey with him. "Well, well," he intoned, "look at what the cat dragged in." He moved the gun barrel away from Honey's head for a moment, gesturing for Jim to join the other three Bob-Whites. "Close," he chuckled evilly,



“but no cigar.” Loosening his grip on Honey a little, he pulled the mask from his face.

Jim stared in stunned silence. “You aren’t Jonesy,” he breathed.

“Well, ain’t you the smart one,” the man taunted, waving the gun again. “I sure ain’t this Jonesy fella, but I reckon I’d like to meet him. If he wants you this bad, maybe we can do business. But not now. Now I want what’s mine.” He raised his voice deliberately. “If I don’t get what belongs to me, I’m gonna start shootin’ fish in this here pretty barrel.”

“Let them go, Bull.” Dan appeared in the doorway, hands raised high, his face pale despite the shadows, his voice strained and resigned. “It’s me you want, not them.”

“There you are, boy.” Bull pushed Honey to the ground, but kept the gun pointed in her direction. “I’ve been waiting for you. Come to Daddy!”

## ***Part 5***

Dan stepped into the room, his eyes avoiding contact with any of his friends, his attention focused on the man with the gun. “I’m here, Bull. Let them go.” When Bull scowled, Dan tacked on a hasty, “Please?”

“Please, what?”

Dan swallowed hard. Ducking his head and lowering his eyes, he tried again, “Please, Daddy? Please, just let them go.”

Bull laughed again. “Better, boy. I’m glad to see you remember some of your manners. God knows I worked you hard on them.” He shook his head. “But I don’t think so.” He nudged Honey with the toe of his boot, and she squirmed away from him. “You owe me, boy. You owe me big, and I figure your little friends here can help pay

down your debt.” Dan kept his head down, listening as Bull rambled. “Yessiree, buckaroo, there’s a lot of nice little knick-knacks in this here house.” He tossed a plastic bag of zip ties at Dan’s feet. “You get to tie–ing up your little friends,” he laughed at his own pun, “and then you can go collect us a few souvenirs. Dan bent to pick up the bag, Bull’s voice rolling past him as he did. “Now, in my original plan, I thought I’d just shoot them all. Then I got to thinkin’ that the girls might have some value, but this one,” he kicked at Trixie. “This one’s vicious. She bit me!”

Dan knelt behind Jim, securing his wrists as loosely as he could manage. Bull kept on talking. “Besides, she’s not worth much, but the other two, their daddies are rollin’ in the dough. So, I’m thinkin’ we’ll take violet-eyes and golden girl with us – for a while. Maybe there’s some use for red there, too. Seems like that Jonesy guy might be interested in him.” Dan finished binding Di, and moved on to Mart. Bull continued, “The rest of them we’ll leave here. They’ll be safe enough.”

“Thank you,” Dan managed to choke out the words, not believing Bull for a minute. Stealthily, he slipped out his pocketknife, opened the blade, and placed it in Mart’s bound hand. Mart shifted slightly, hiding the knife in his closed fist. Dan crawled towards Brian, as Bull stepped over Trixie and moved toward the Bob-Whites.

“Yep. They’ll be safe. Right up until the house goes up in flames. So sad. They’ll be safe. Then they’ll be ashes. Bring me the girl.”

Dan stood up. “You can’t set the house on fire.”

“Of course not,” Bull told him. “That’s your job. Bring the girl, before I change my mind and shoot somebody.”

Dan slipped his hand under Di’s elbow and helped her to her feet. As he tugged her gently around Jim, he noticed that Bull was tracking him with the gun. He stopped. “I don’t want to go with you.”

“You don’t get to decide.” The gun stayed on Dan. “I’m in charge. You never should have run in the first place. Nobody gets out

unless I take them out. I keep what's mine, boy."

Dan gave Di a soft push, thrusting her away from him. The gun didn't move. Dan looked at his friends, his family. "Take me out," he said, stretching out his arms. "I'd rather die with them than live with you."

Bull's face reddened with rage. "You don't talk to me like that, boy. I can see you need a few reminders of what happens when you don't obey. I'm looking forward to that."

Dan swallowed again, his face going an even whiter shade of pale. "I'm done. I'm out. I won't do what you say, and I won't go with you."

Fury oozed from every pore on Bull's body. Suddenly, he smirked. "You will," he said. "I don't have to kill you. I can shoot pieces off of you, and then I'll make you watch while I kill each of them. Where should I start?" He moved the gun, pointing it first at Trixie, and then at Brian. "Eeny, meeny, miney..."

Bull stopped in mid rhyme, the gun dropped from his hand as his heavy body thudded to the floor. Harrison stepped from the hidden passage, the cast iron skillet with which he had hit Bull clenched tightly in his hand. He kicked the gun across the room and looked at the prostrate man. As sirens rose in the distance, Harrison asked calmly, "Daniel, would you hand me those ties, please?"

\* \* \*

Miss Trask shifted, trying to work out the pins and needles prickling through her legs. By her count, she had been under the desk for almost two hours. Two hours! Almost two hours for that awful man to do heaven knows what to the Bob-Whites. To his son.

She shuddered and pulled harder at the restraints. Though she hadn't heard footsteps for quite a while, she tried to keep her movements as silent as possible. Waiting quietly to be rescued wasn't turning out to be a good plan. Action was now required. Sadly, the restraints refused to budge. If anything, they were tighter than when she had started struggling.

Miss Trask closed her eyes and pushed away the screaming pain in her wrists. There *had* to be a way to get free. Deciding that she had wasted enough time, the silver-haired governess worked herself free of the desk. With the ease of balance acquired during years of ballet training, she managed to stand, though her ankles were bound by more of the cruel zip ties. Unable to use her hands for balance because they were tied behind her back, she stumbled and banged her hip against the desk. Perhaps a few more years of ballet wouldn't have been amiss, she mused. But the shoes had been uncomfortable.

Hopping in an irritatingly undignified fashion, she turned so that she was half-sitting, half-leaning against the desk. Surely there had to be a way to remove the zip ties... The sharp point of the desk drawer handle pricked her side, causing her to flinch, and then to think. She twisted until the zip-tie around her wrist was against the handle. Perhaps she could use it to saw through the restraint...

No. The handle was sharp enough to bruise her, but not sharp enough to slice the plastic. *Useless.*

Unless...

She tugged on the drawer, and was shocked to find it unlocked. It slid open easily. Reaching into the drawer with her bound hands, she rifled through the contents, trying to identify the objects by feel alone. Papers, paper clips, paper weight... She fingered a staple remover thoughtfully, but had to admit that it couldn't tackle the zip ties.

At the back of the drawer, however, she hit pay dirt. Not stopping to wonder whom in the Lynch household had taken up smoking, she clutched the Bic lighter in both hands. Ten minutes and several minor burns later, she felt the plastic restraint begin to soften, and the shackle fell away.

As she returned the lighter to the drawer, Miss Trask found something even more valuable. Mr. Lynch's cell phone, tucked into an unplugged charger, practically threw itself into her hands. She powered the unit on, muffling the start-up sound against her clothes.

To her relief, the phone was fully charged, and she set about placing some very important phone calls.

Creeping to the door, she peered into the darkness. Empty. As she slipped into the corridor, a shadowy figure caught her eye. The movement of the long shadows was familiar, as was the shape of what he carried in his and. Taking the risk, Miss Trask whispered, "Harrison?"

The figure halted. Turning slowly, his shoulders slumped in relief. "Miss Trask?" Quickly he moved to her. "Are you injured?"

"I'm fine. I've called the police. Where are the children?"

Harrison's answer was cut off by a gunshot, echoing from the floor above. Turning, he ordered grimly, "Stay here!" and disappeared into the kitchen. Margery Trask bit back a reply, squared her shoulders and looked around for a weapon.

\* \* \*

Spider Webster careened to a stop behind the Bob-White station wagon. Weapon drawn, he quickly ascertained that the vehicle was empty, and then made his way to the front door of the Lynch home. After using his walkie-talkie to inform dispatch of his intentions, and being informed that back-up was only seconds behind him, he pushed the door open and stepped inside.

"Officer?"

Spider whipped to face the voice, finger on the trigger of his gun.

"It's Miss Trask," the calm, well-regulated voice continued.

After training his flashlight on the woman who stood only a few feet from the door, Spider relaxed his stance. "Lower your weapon, ma'am. Please," he added hastily.

Miss Trask lowered her hand, and the Kosta Boda candle holder

she gripped with it. "I've been hearing noises upstairs for the last ten minutes."

Both sets of eyes shot to the staircase. They could hear muted voices and muffled thumps, growing louder by the minute.

Miss Trask frowned as they sprinted towards the stairs. "That sounded almost like..."

"Stay back, ma'am," Spider warned.

Miss Trask raised an eyebrow and followed directly behind him. "You'll find that the situation is under control."

"How do you figure?" he muttered, proceeding down the upper hallway carefully, gun ready. The wail of sirens becoming louder told them that back-up was close.

"You'll find the perpetrator with a frying pan sized dent in his skull," she told him, staying politely behind him.

"What?!" Spider's incredulous whisper was cut off as the door to the nursery swung open. They entered the room carefully, and found a shaken group of teenagers huddled in a tight group, and a body lying in the middle of the room. Harrison stood between the young people and the unconscious form, an iron skillet dangling from his hand.

Spider shot a curious glance at Miss Trask, then knelt over the body, speaking into his walkie-talkie again. Assured that Spider had the ruffian, whoever he was, under control, Miss Trask turned her attention to the Bob-Whites. Honey threw herself into her governess' arms, tears tracking down her face.

"It was so awful!" she cried. "That horrible, horrible man..." Honey looked down at the man on the floor, turning away with a shudder. "He would have taken Dan. And done awful things to the rest of us. He was going to burn down the house!"

"It's okay, Honey," Miss Trask soothed, rubbing her young

charge's back. "It's over now."

"Yes, it is," Jim agreed, placing his hand on his sister's back. "Thanks to Harrison."

All eyes turned to the butler. The normally unflappable Harrison flushed as he heard exclamations of praise, and the skillet slipped from his fingers, landing with a soft thud on the thick carpet. "I hope I haven't injured the man too severely," he said, turning away from the admiring eyes and back to the prostrate form.

Dan's voice was bitter. "If he's still alive, you didn't hit him hard enough."

Regan, accompanied by several police officers, burst into the room. "You don't mean that." He approached his nephew slowly.

"Yes. I do." Dan's eyes were black with rage. "You don't know what he did. What he was going to do."

"No," Regan agreed. "I don't. But you do. And so do the rest of your friends. And the police will know, too." He stepped closer. "He'll go to jail, Dan. He *will* be punished. And some day, when you're ready, you can tell me about it."

Dan moved to stand over Bull's limp form. The zip ties had been replaced with standard issue police handcuffs. An ugly bump covered a good portion of his head, and was still spreading. The cruel sneer he perpetually sported had been wiped away.

And still the man exuded pure evil.

Jim stood close beside him, not quite touching him. "I know how hard that was," he said, referring to Dan being willing to sacrifice himself for his friends.

Dan shrugged, his eyes still on Bull. "It was the only thing I could do."

Jim nodded flatly. Both young men had made the same decision

that night; the decision to risk their own lives to stop the monster from their pasts. And they both knew that they would do the same thing again, even if it didn't end as well as this situation had.

Trixie shouldered her way between her two friends, wrapping an arm around each of them. "Thank you," she whispered, standing on tip-toe to give each of them a kiss on the cheek.

Staring down at Bull, Trixie asked, "I don't suppose the police would like it if someone happened to accidentally hit him with the iron skillet a second time?"

Dan's bark of laughter surprised them all.

"I think the one hit did it," Regan assured her, as Jim led Trixie away from temptation. Regan opened his arms hesitantly to Dan, who stepped in, allowing his uncle envelope him in a tight hug. "The paramedics are downstairs with Mr. Williams. Let's get everyone checked out."

"Miss Trask has some nasty burns," Brian agreed, "and I'm sure that anyone the creep hit should be checked. My head is still pounding."

Regan reluctantly released his nephew. "Mine too," he admitted, "And I also think that I owe Harrison a drink when all this is taken care of."

The Bob-Whites chorused their agreement, praising the quick-thinking and level-headed butler as they followed him out of the room. Dan lagged behind, taking one last look at Bull. "I have new ties, now," he whispered to the still-unconscious form. "Ties that bind tighter than anything you could ever understand."

He closed the door behind him and hurried after his family.

***The End***



## ***Author's Notes***

19,339 words total

Mary 7220 ~ ~ ~ Ronda 5001 ~ ~ ~ Ryl 7318

**Ronda:** When the three of us decided to try our hand at a joint story, I was excited. I enjoy writing with others because it takes me out of my comfort zone and allows me to stretch a little. Since I'm also a bit of a control freak, it also works as good therapy. I can only control what I write, and I have to be flexible enough to make the elements work with what others have written. Our chat discussions were wonderful. I saved the transcripts -- they were that much fun!

Monsters come in all kinds of shapes and sizes. Vampires, werewolves, mummies and mass murderers, just to name a few. But, the scariest monsters are often the humans in our own pasts. I think that's what the three of us were striving to show in this piece. You don't need salt, silver bullets or wooden stakes to slay your demons: You need the love, trust and support of your family and family of friends.

Writing with Mary and Ryl has been a pleasure, a joy. They are very talented and supportive writers and human beings. I am pleased to include them in my circle of demon-slayers.

**Ryl:** Thank you to my wonderful collaborators, Dianafan and Rolyru. I had great fun writing with you!

**Mary:** Way back in July, Ronda, Ryl, and I were chatting one night. Ronda suggested doing a group story, and Ryl and I were excited to have the chance to write with her. Thank you to my fabulous teammates Ronda and Ryl! I enjoyed our brainstorming chats, finding the right graphics, writing my parts of the story - and especially, reading their parts! I've always wanted to do a Halloween story and could never think of any plots, so it was doubly exciting to participate in this one. As Ronda said, the Bob-White spirit is really important in overcoming the demons of our pasts.

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