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The Resurrection of Nora O'Brien

Abigail Elizabeth Benson

Missouri State University, Benson14@live.missouristate.edu

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THE RESURRECTION OF NORA O'BRIEN

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Abigail Elizabeth Benson

May 2019

THE RESURRECTION OF NORA O'BRIEN

English

Missouri State University, May 2019

Master of Arts

Abigail Elizabeth Benson

ABSTRACT

There is a cave, hidden in the hills, that brings the dead back to life. Its power is the driving force behind the blood feud between the Walshes and the O'Briens that lasts for generations. Jeremiah Walsh, a young boy growing up just after the civil war, is entrusted with the location of the cave and its secrets. But when he kills to protect his family legacy, he is stricken with guilt and questions his loyalties. His story parallels Nora O'Brien's, a teenage girl who moves to the Ozarks with her family after the death of her grandfather. As she explores her grandfather's house, her family's dark past comes to light and she finds herself on a quest to find the legendary cave. Eventually, Jeremiah and Nora's timelines merge. *The Resurrection of Nora O'Brien* uses dual timelines to create a story set in both the past and the present. It does not conform to a single genre, but rather blends genre, as John Gardner talks about in *The Art of Fiction*. It is part regional novel, like *Winter's Bone* by Daniel Woodrell; part historical fiction, like *The Teeth of the Souls* by Steve Yates; and part fantasy, like Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting*.

KEYWORDS: novel, Ozarks, historical, folklore, superstition, family, region, mystery, caves

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Approved:

Jennifer Murvin, M.F.A, Thesis Committee Chair

W.D. Blackmon, Ph.D., Committee Member

Michael Czyzniejewski, M.F.A., Committee Member

Joel Coltharp, M.A., Committee Member

Julie Masterson, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College

In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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I dedicate this thesis to Mom and Dad, thank you for your love and support.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

There is a cave, hidden in the Ozark mountains, that brings the dead back to life. Its power is what sparks the feud between the Walshes and the O'Briens that lasts for generations. Jeremiah Walsh, a young boy growing up just after the American Civil War, is entrusted with the location of the cave and its secrets. But when he kills Annie O'Brien, a girl he secretly loves, to protect his family legacy, he is stricken with guilt and madness. His story parallels Nora O'Brien's, a teenage girl in present day who moves to the Missouri Ozarks with her family after the death of her grandfather. As she explores her grandfather's house, her family's dark past comes to light and she finds herself on a quest to find the legendary cave. Eventually, Jeremiah and Nora's timelines merge.

I have struggled to define my novel, *The Resurrection of Nora O'Brien* because it does not conform to a single genre. Set in the Ozarks, it is part historical fiction, part regional novel, part folklore, part coming-of-age story, and part mystery. In *The Art of Fiction* John Gardner says, "genre-crossing of one sort or another is behind most of the great literary art in the English tradition" (20). He points to Faulkner, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton, "none of these writers, ancient or modern, sat down to write 'to express himself.' They sat down to write this kind of story or that, or to mix this form with that form, producing some new effect" (21). While it is not impossible to categorize my novel, I think it would be unfair to limit my story to a single genre.

Setting is very important in my story and I am inspired by authors like Daniel Woodrell and Steve Yates, who write stories set in the Ozarks. Woodrell's *Winter's Bone* paints a breathtaking picture of the rural Ozarks which at the same time is gritty and riveting. I strive for

my story to be as equally beautiful and gripping. I am especially interested in how other authors write about caves, since the cave is a central part of my novel. There is a scene in *Winter's Bone* where Woodrell's protagonist, Ree Dolly, spends the night in a cave:

Ree left the tracks and crossed a level field to reach the slope of caves...the caves were easy to see from below, but difficult to reach. Ree snatched onto saplings to pull herself through the beating weather and up the steepness toward the slant gaping cave she knew best, the cave with a wall of stones standing in the mouth. (65)

There is a point in the novel where Ree thinks her family will have to resort to living in the caves because they will lose their home. She doesn't think it so bad, since early inhabitants of the area lived in the caves. Caves are a unique feature of the Ozarks and many local legends involve caves. I've been visiting Marvel Cave in Branson since I was a young child. I am fascinated by how it was formed and how it was discovered, but I have been particularly fascinated with its ties to Harold Bell Wright's *The Shepherd of the Hills*. Wright stayed in a cabin located in the cave for days at a time, and it is believed he wrote part of his novel there. I like to imagine myself living in a cave, if only to focus on writing my next novel. Wright wrote a lot about the region. He not only dedicates *The Shepherd of the Hills* "to Frances, my wife. In memory of that beautiful summer in the Ozark Hills..." he even begins with "...it all happened in the Ozark Mountains, many miles from what we of the city call civilization" (13).

Perhaps the most famous literary cave would be McDougal's Cave in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*:

The mouth of the cave was up the hillside – an opening shaped like a letter A. Its massive oaken door stood unbarred. Within was a small chamber, chilly as an ice-house, and walled by Nature with solid limestone that was dewy with a cold sweat. It was romantic and mysterious to stand here in the deep gloom and look out upon the green valley shining in the sun. (225-226)

I still remember being engrossed as a young reader when Tom Sawyer and Becky Thatcher got lost in the cave, not knowing if they would be rescued. There is something magical and dangerous about caves. This is not the first time a cave has appeared in one of my stories and I think that I am so drawn to them because there is a world below, much different from the world above, and we are still exploring it.

The beauty and nature of the Ozarks is just one element I want readers to take away from my story. I want more complex ideas interwoven into the plot. In *Winter's Bone*, Woodrell explores ideas of family ties and survival. I think these are important ideas that can be found in my story as well. The Walshes and the O'Briens have been compared to the Hatfields and McCoy's and I make a comparison to the Montagues and Capulets in chapter 3 when Nora's uncle Charlie tells her "The Ozarks version of Romeo and Juliet", a story about two unnamed young lovers who fought on opposite sides during the Civil War. The boy fighting for the North fakes his death to escape the war, but the girl, who disguises herself as a soldier, watches what she believes to be his real death on the battlefield and kills herself out of grief. He awakens and takes his own life when he finds her dead beside him. This is not the only love story in my novel that is fated from the start. The forbidden romance between Jeremiah and Annie in the past timeline mirrors the romance sparking between Jeremiah and Nora in the present.

"Daniel Woodrell coined the term 'country noir' with his 1996 novel *Give Us a Kiss: A Country Noir*" (Merrigan). Also known as "rural noir", "country noir" is dark and raw and centers around characters who are poor (economically or morally), rough around the edges, and generally unable to escape their ill-fated circumstances. Originally, I was aiming for this story to fall under the genre, but it has evolved into much more than that.

The unknown is important, especially regarding the supernatural and to build suspense, but my story is not a who-done-it kind of mystery. *The Resurrection of Nora O'Brien* explores history as well as folklore. Yates's *The Teeth of the Souls* is based on Springfield history while *The Legend of the Albino Farm* is based on a Springfield superstition. Both are written based on thorough research. Elements of the supernatural are what push my story beyond what other regional authors have done. Jeremiah struggles with what is real and what he imagines because of the guilt he feels. I leave it up to interpretation on whether or not Annie is a figment of his imagination or if she really appears to him as a ghost:

He closed his eyes, hoping he had only dreamed it all, but he knew in his heart that he had killed Annie O'Brien.

“What was it that you said to me? ‘We come back; we always come back’?”

Jeremiah turned his head to find a figure sitting on the edge of the bed, her back to him. She turned, a hint of a smile on her lips, the closest she ever came to smiling. “Why did you do it, Jeremiah?” Annie asked. (26)

I use folklore, legends, and superstitions of the Ozarks in addition to history. The scattering of pawpaw seeds during the burying ritual the Walshes perform is based on an old midwestern tradition. More common traditions also seen are the mirrors covered and clocks stopped at the passing of Grandfather O'Brien. Similar to the spring in Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting*, the cave is a natural feature that provides supernatural power: resurrection from the dead and immortality. And like the Tuck family, the characters in my story struggle with the power nature gives. Some see it as a blessing, while others think it is a curse, “We don't deserve no blessings – if it is a blessing. And, likewise, I don't see how we deserve to be cursed, if it is a curse” (Babbitt 55). While realism dominates the text, the mystical is the crux of the plot.

To tell my story, I use dual timelines; the chapters alternating between the past (1882) and present. The past timeline focuses on the life of Jeremiah Walsh while the present timeline

focuses on Nora O'Brien. While many authors such as Kate Morton in *The Secret Keeper* and Kate Atkinson in *Life After Life* use multiple or alternative timelines in their novels, some of my characters exist within both timelines because they are immortal. It has been challenging balancing the two. Nora and Jeremiah meet in the present timeline because, while it is not yet explained in this draft, the past timeline will reveal all.

During revision, I was posed with this question: Why is this Nora's story and not Annie's? Much like Winnie Foster in Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting*, I wanted a character to discover the truth over time and be faced with a difficult decision in the end. In the past timeline, the Walshes and the O'Briens are killing each other over the power of immortality. In the present, Nora will be tempted to follow in their footsteps, but Jeremiah knows that living forever comes at a price. While Annie might not know the location of the cave at the beginning of the book, she already knows much more about its power than the reader. I want the reader to uncover the truth along with Nora and recognize that such power can impact the present just as much as the past.

It has been both challenging and exhilarating to write the beginning of this novel for my thesis. I hope that readers find my setting unique, the plot thrilling, and the characters fascinating. I want my readers to be transported to this part of the world, where things are beautiful, but also dark and enigmatic. I hope that the dual timelines are not confusing, but rather add mystery and spark curiosity. Above all, I want readers to enjoy reading this story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

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PROLOGUE: NOVEMBER 1882

The cave was difficult to find in the light of day, let alone in the nighttime and the rain. Jeremiah reminded himself that that was the point, to keep it hidden. He had been there half a dozen times before, with Pa leading the way. This was the first time trying to find it on his own. He *had* to find it. He ran ahead of his older brothers, who dragged Ishmael's lifeless body through the mud. They were close; they had to be.

"Happy is the bride that the sun shines on; blessed are the dead that the rain falls on," Jack mumbled. "Perfect night for a burying."

"How much further, Jeremiah?" Thomas called. He was bearing most of Ishmael's weight, his face streaked with what looked like mud, but revealed itself as crimson when the lightning flashed.

"Not far; I think I see the black walnut. There, on the hill."

He led them forward, and soon the brothers were standing under its wide branches, slightly sheltered from the storm. "We need to move," Jack spoke. "Can't be under a tree in a lightning storm."

Jeremiah nodded. "We gotta find the spring. That's where the cave mouth is."

They pushed forward, down the other side of the hill, carrying Ishmael slowly down the steep slope. It was nearly impossible to find the little pool in the rain. Each puddle resembled the spring, each rock face looked like the cave, and Jeremiah felt like they were moving in the wrong direction.

"There!" Jack shouted over the rumble of thunder, pointing. Jeremiah turned and when the lightning flashed, he could see what looked like a shadow below a jagged rock outcrop,

above a large pool. Jeremiah was not sure until they were wading into the water. They had found the cave. The rain had caused the water to rise, and no one knew how deep the pool was.

They paused for a moment; it was going to be difficult to transport Ishmael's body into the cave. Jack, who was the biggest, decided to carry Ishmael on his back, with Thomas following behind. The water was freezing and came up to their chests at the deepest part, but they made their way further into the cave. The howl of the storm grew muffled, distant. It was so dark they had to hold onto one another so they wouldn't get separated. Jeremiah kept moving forward, leading the small group until the water receded and they found their feet on rocky, yet solid, ground. He did not stop moving forward until his outstretched arms felt a rock wall in front of him. He got down on his hands and knees and patted the ground, searching. His hands found the small tinder box they were seeking, and he opened it. Inside he blindly found a stone and a piece of metal. He struck them together, and for a split second, sparks illuminated the tinderbox in front of him. He found the wax candle inside and set it aside while he used the fire striker once more, aiming it downward so that the sparks would ignite the tinder inside the box. Once the embers fell, he blew on the box until a small fire burned. He put the candle to it, and soon a small part of the cave was illuminated.

There were more candles and several lanterns in the cave. The boys busied themselves lighting, having set Ishmael's body to rest briefly on the rocky ground. Once they had enough light to see, they found the tunnel that led to the main cavern. Again, Jeremiah led the way, Jack and Thomas carrying Ishmael. The passage was narrow. Sometimes it branched off into other tunnels, and Jeremiah had to direct them down the correct path. In certain places, they had to duck or move single-file through, but eventually they came upon a large room, too tall to see the ceiling and too deep to see how far back it went. The rocky floor they had been walking on

turned to soft clay, and their boots sank. Any sound of the storm raging outside was replaced by grave silence. They carried Ishmael deep into the cavern, past tools hastily strewn about, which they were careful not to step over, and rows of upturned earth. They found a spot, away from the other plots, where the clay had not been disturbed. They grabbed spades and shovels and got to work.

“Don’t dig too deep,” Jeremiah warned. “It’ll make things harder when we have to dig him up again.” They made quick work of it and placed Ishmael’s body in the ground. Jeremiah went back to the spring with a piece of clean linen. He returned, the linen soaked in water and wrapped it around Ishmael’s head. Thomas took a pouch from his belt which held pawpaw seeds. He sprinkled the entire bag over Ishmael’s grave.

Jack said a prayer and they shoveled the clay back into the grave. It filled quicker than it took them to dig it. Jeremiah patted it down and found a chisel and a wooden plank among the equipment. He hastily inscribed:

Ishmael Walsh

November 3, 1882

Jeremiah placed it at the head of the grave as a marker. They discarded their tools and swept away their footprints as they exited the cavern, heading back down the passageway. They extinguished their candles and lanterns and left them where they had been found before wading into the spring water towards the cave mouth.

“We should split up and go home different ways, just in case one of us comes across an O’Brien,” Jack said. They agreed and separated, Thomas to the west, Jack to the east, and Jeremiah to the north, up the hill. The storm had let up a little, but rain was still falling from the heavens.

Jeremiah climbed up to the black walnut and leaned against the trunk to catch his breath. They had done it. He felt proud that he had not led his brothers astray, that he had found the cave, that his eldest brother was now resting peacefully in the ground. He prayed that they would all make it home in one piece. He had not given himself time to mourn his brother's death and he pushed back the tears threatening to fall. They would be reunited someday, he reminded himself. It was only a matter of time.

The sound of a rifle being cocked interrupted Jeremiah's thoughts. "Don't move," said a voice, yards away, out of his line of vision. "Or I'll shoot."

Jeremiah froze, recognizing the voice as that of Annie O'Brien, the youngest of the O'Brien clan. "That you, Annie?" he asked. "What are you doing out here in the rain?"

"I should be asking you the same question, Jeremiah," she spat. "But I reckon I already know the answer. It's close by, ain't it? The cave. You've come to bury Ishmael."

"All by myself?"

"Charles and Betty are out there. They'll find the others. We won't stop until every one of your kin end up like ol' Ishmael."

"We'll just come back. We always come back."

There was a long silence, so long that Jeremiah thought maybe Annie had left, but then she spoke. "Where is it, Jeremiah?"

"You'll have to shoot me before I tell an O'Brien anything." He drew a revolver from inside his coat and aimed it at her.

The shot rang out like the last crack of thunder, and another body was buried in the cave that night.

CHAPTER 1: PRESENT DAY

Grandfather O'Brien's estate was a large stone lake house, much older and grander than any of the other homes Nora had seen on their drive along curving roads, through the hills. They passed a little blue cottage with more lawn ornaments than she had ever seen, as well as many homes that looked abandoned, but were probably meth labs or stills. That was what Nora thought of her mother's childhood, growing up in the Ozark Mountains: meth, moonshine, and hillbillies.

Her mother, Anne, was smoking a cigarette in the passenger seat of Steve's Honda Civic. Steve was Anne's latest beau, an architect, and a man of few words. Anne wore large sunglasses and refused to listen to the radio the entire ride because she had a hangover from too many Manhattans at the hotel bar the night before. Anne had been drinking a lot in the last week, since she found out about Grandpa O'Brien's death.

Nora had the entire backseat to herself since her older brother Olly drove the twins in his Ford Taurus, following them through the hills. She felt bad for Olly, imagining their younger siblings, Benjamin and Beatrice, slowly driving him insane playing I Spy and the Alphabet Game. She passed the time listening to music and snapping pictures out the window, most of which were just blurry photos of trees. She did get a decent picture of a waterfall, cascading down a rock face, and another of a little white Baptist church.

Just when she was going to ask about the next bathroom break, Steve turned onto an almost-hidden driveway. He had to get out to open the rusty gate blocking their path. There were signs that read: "Private Property" and "Trespassers Will be Shot." Steve climbed back into the car and proceeded down the dirt road lined with ancient cedar trees another half mile to the

house. They passed a collapsed barn, now just a pile of wood; the only thing still standing was the stone silo. “Shit,” Anne cursed, “I always thought that barn would burn before it fell.”

Soon they were pulling onto the gravel driveway. The lake house loomed over them like the colossal stone creatures Olly fought in his video games. Nora had only seen pictures of the house where her mother grew up, but it looked bigger and more menacing than the old sepia-toned photographs she kept in an album under her bed. The house had clearly been neglected; several windowpanes had been broken, the roof was sagging, and the yard looked like a jungle, the grass easily higher than Nora’s knees.

When Nora was in middle school, she was assigned a genealogy project. She had to draw a family tree and present a paper about either a family tradition or the life of a relative. Her parents were divorced by that point, and Anne didn’t like to talk about her childhood, so she simply pulled out a box from the attic and gave it to Nora without a word. Inside were pictures and journals and small objects like old coins and arrowheads and marbles. Nora’s favorite discovery was an old bullet casing that had been attached to a chain. She wore it around her neck and the first time Anne saw her wearing it, she frowned. “Where the hell did you find that?”

“In the box you gave me. Kinda cool, don’t you think?” Anne didn’t say another word and Nora never took it off her neck.

She ended up writing her paper about her great-great grandmother, Annie O’Brien, Anne’s namesake. Annie’s childhood diaries had been among those in the box. Nora’s project had impressed her teacher so much that she got to present it at the school history fair. As Nora received her third-place ribbon, Anne, who had been seated at the back of the auditorium, stood and left to smoke a cigarette. Nora grew even more curious about her family’s history, especially

since it seemed to upset her mother so. She hoped that this trip would reveal the secrets Anne had been hiding.

The house was before her now, the one she had been dreaming of seeing ever since she discovered a picture of it in the box Anne had given her, and it seemed lifeless. As she was getting out of the car, some hound dogs bounded around the house, barking and howling. “Shut up! Shut up!” Anne yelled, and they put their tails between their legs and retreated. “Stupid mutts.” She slammed the door shut and started towards the house.

The door opened before they could reach it and Nora gasped. She had never met Grandfather O’Brien, but she had seen him in old photographs and received birthday cards with two-dollar bills from him. Before them stood his spitting image, a man in a denim shirt and jeans with a wild beard. He was intimidating, over six-feet tall, hulking and holding a rifle. It wasn’t pointed at them, but rather he held it at his side. And though he was frowning, his sour expression melted away as they approached.

“Annie!” he called. Nora thought someone was playing a trick on them, but Anne walked right up to him and he engulfed her in a hug. Her mother stiffened, never one for affection. He let go, and she nodded at him. “Good to see you, too, Charles.”

Nora breathed a breath of relief. It was Uncle Charlie, the eldest of the remaining O’Briens. “Nora!” he said, holding his arms open for a hug. “I haven’t seen you since you were a babe.” She let the man hug her. He smelled like sweat, firewood and beef jerky. “How old are you now? Fourteen?”

“I just turned seventeen two weeks ago,” she replied after he released her.

Uncle Charlie shook his head. "Time sure has flown." He went on to greet Olly and the twins as they clamored out of the car. He ushered everyone inside the dark house. It was like stepping into an old movie. Time had frozen for a hundred years, it seemed, inside.

"Why is it so dark?" Beatrice asked.

"Yeah, why is it so dark?" Benjamin echoed.

"Because your Grandpa didn't have electricity," Uncle Charlie answered.

Anne moaned. "I can't believe this! Please tell me he at least installed indoor plumbing."

Uncle Charlie grinned. "Welcome home, Annie."

* * *

Nora and Olly shared a room on the second floor next door to the twins. Anne and Steve were down the hallway. "How long do you think we are going to be here?" Nora asked, exploring the room, looking in closets and pulling out drawers and peering out windows.

Olly sat down on his bed and shrugged, pulling out his handheld game. "The funeral is in a few days, and Mom and Uncle Charlie have to figure out what to do with all of Grandfather's stuff. We might be here a while."

Nora stood up from where she had been peeking under her bed. "Do you think they're gonna sell the house?"

Olly shrugged again, explosions and machine gun noises erupting from his game. "Probably. Not that anyone would want it."

"Ugh, don't say that."

"What? Would you buy it? Would you want to live in a house with no electricity?"

"I don't know."

"How about going to the outhouse every time you need to pee?"

“How hard it is to hire someone to install electricity and plumbing?”

“Don’t ask me; ask Steve. But I bet it will be expensive. It would probably be cheaper to tear down the house than try to fix everything.” Olly cursed at the game and didn’t notice when Nora left to explore the rest of the house.

Beatrice and Benjamin were running up and down the stairs, stomping and hollering until Anne shouted at them from behind her closed bedroom door to knock it off. They bounded down the stairs once more and out the front door to play in the gravel driveway.

Nora couldn’t walk down the hallway without making the floorboards creak under her weight. Old photographs, ones she had never seen, of people she didn’t recognize were framed on the walls. In one old black-and-white photograph, a man stood in front of what she assumed was the barn before it collapsed. In another, a woman was holding a baby, in another—a family portrait—was a man, a woman, and their three children. The youngest of the children caught her eye, and when Nora moved to examine it closer, she had to fight the urge to stumble backwards. The girl had a striking resemblance to her mother, with straight black hair and dark, cold eyes. The girl frowned into the camera, her arms crossed in defiance. Nora shook it off and kept moving down the hallway. Besides the photographs, taxidermized animals adorned the walls. Common things like deer and turkeys, wild boar and foxes, and predator animals like wildcats, black bears, and some animals Nora had never seen before. There were also weapons mounted on the walls: guns, axes, arrows, spears. Some looked brand new while others looked like ancient relics. Nora came to a black cloth, draped over something—a painting? Just as she reached out for it, something moved in her peripheral vision. She turned, shocked.

Uncle Charlie frowned. “Please don’t remove the covers from the mirrors. Not until your grandpa is in the ground.”

“What?” Nora stepped back, surprised by her uncle’s sudden appearance.

“When someone dies, we cover all the mirrors to avoid letting bad luck and spirits into the house. We also stop all of the clocks, so don’t wind those, either.”

“But what if I need to know what time it is?”

“Out here, we go by the light of the sun and the moon.”

Nora’s eyes widened. “Really?”

Uncle Charlie laughed. “Nah, I just check the time on my cell phone.” He held up his phone and showed her that it was just after noon.

“And how does one charge their cell phone in a house with no electricity?”

“My RV has electricity,” Uncle Charlie said. “It’s parked out back.”

“Please tell me your RV has Wifi and running water.”

“And cable. The Cardinals are playing tonight. Do you know if your momma’s boyfriend likes baseball? I’m usually pretty good at reading people, but he’s a tough nut to crack.”

“Steve’s an architect. That’s about all I know about him. He never says anything.”

“Hm.” Uncle Charlie scratched his head. He stared at a picture of Grandfather O’Brien on safari in Africa, standing over the carcass of a lion, wearing a pith helmet and holding a shotgun.

“You were close to Grandfather, right? I never met him, but I want to know everything there is to know about him. I want to know about you, and Mom, growing up in this house.”

Uncle Charlie laughed again. “It don’t take much to convince an old coot like me to reminisce on the good ole days. I’ll probably bore you to death with all the stories I got. Tell ya what, Kiddo. If you come watch the game with me, I’ll give ya a history lesson during the commercials. Deal?” He held out his hand for a shake.

Nora hesitated. Uncle Charlie was practically a stranger, but the more she talked to him, the more she liked her mountain man of an uncle. Anne would never tell her anything about her grandfather and her life here, so she grabbed his hand, which seemed twice the size of her own, and shook it. “Deal!”

CHAPTER 2: NOVEMBER 1882

Jeremiah pulled the trigger and watched in disbelief as Annie's body crumpled to the ground. He dropped the pistol, as if it had shocked him, and stared at the heap in the grass.

"Annie?" he said, quietly at first. "Annie?" Louder. "ANNIE?"

He ran to her and flipped her onto her back. Her gray eyes stared blankly up at the sky, and a stream of blood ran down from her forehead. Jeremiah felt the tears well up, the reality of what he did sinking in. He cradled her face in his hands. "I'm sorry, Annie. I didn't mean to." But no amount of apologizing could bring her back. "Come back, Annie. Please. I didn't mean to do it. I swear."

He looked down the hillside, towards the cave. It wasn't going to be an easy task for him, all by himself, but he had to try. He closed her eyes before hoisting her onto his shoulder. She was light, still just a child, but he was low on energy, and it was going to take every last bit he had. He slowly started down the hillside, often losing his footing on the slick grass. He tried carrying her different ways, in his arms, on his back, on his hip. Eventually, he made it to the bottom and waded into the water. He carried her on his back through the cold water and laid her on the gravel as he fumbled with the tinder box. He went back and forth between moving the lantern down the passageway and dragging her body along until he reached the cavern.

Jeremiah had to take a break before he even began digging the grave. He found a spot of untouched clay near some old, now empty, plots and he started to dig. This was the smallest grave he ever had to dig, but the most difficult. He wore his hands raw, and they bled all over everything he touched. He dragged Annie's body into the hole and repeated the ritual that he and his brothers had performed earlier that night. He wrapped her head in spring-wet linen and

spread paw paw seeds over her. He said a prayer, not sure if he remembered all the words correctly, and shoveled the earth over her. He retrieved a wooden plank and inscribed on it:

Annie O'Brien

November 3, 1882

He set it on top of her grave. He exited the cave to find that the rain had stopped and the sky was starting to lighten. He picked some wildflowers growing nearby, still wet from the storm, and returned to the cave to set them atop both Annie and Ishmael's plots. Knowing that his work was finished, he extinguished the candle in his lantern and left the cave. He remembered climbing the hill, but in a haze that slowly faded into nothingness.

CHAPTER 3: PRESENT DAY

Uncle Charlie's RV was parked precariously on the cliff overlooking the lake. It looked like all it would take was a good shove or a heavy gust of wind and the RV would be sent tumbling into the water. Nora knocked on the screen door and heard him call, "Come in" over the sound of the television. She stepped up into the space and found him reclining in a La-Z-Boy across from a small box TV with a built-in VHS player and rabbit ear antenna on top. "Make yourself at home," he said, motioning to the sofa with ugly floral upholstery. "I'd offer you a beverage, but all I got are Natty Lights, and I don't think your Mama would approve." Nora sat down, clutching the spiral notebook she brought to her chest. She felt stupid for bringing it, but she wanted to write everything down. She loved the idea of starting her own journal, like Annie O'Brien's. But she was at a loss at where to begin.

"Steven said he might come by later, didn't seem too thrilled about it, though," Uncle Charlie said.

"Who?" Nora asked, puzzled.

"Your Mama's beau."

"Oh, Steve..." Nora corrected.

"Yeah, said he was more of a Giants fan." Uncle Charlie put his chair upright and turned to her. "So, what do you want to know? Ask away, Kiddo."

"Um, well, I guess, start from the beginning. The furthest back you know of, our earliest ancestors."

"That depends on who you talk to. Christians believe that God created the first humans, Adam and Eve. Darwinists believe we evolved--."

“No, no, no.” Nora laughed, hoping he was only joking. “I mean, the first O’Briens. O’Brien is an Irish name, I believe.”

“Sure is. Your great, great, great, great, great grandparents, Brigid and Cormac O’Brien were from Northern Ireland – near Belfast, I think. They came here because the new world promised opportunity for everyone. They pushed West until they found somewhere to settle, somewhere they could farm and raise a family.”

“Here, you mean?”

Uncle Charlie nodded. “Moving here was like planting a tree. And that tree grew and grew until the roots were so deep that it would be impossible to move the tree without killing it. We’re stubborn that way, I suppose.”

“I don’t mean to go off-topic, but Mom seems to be the first one to move far away from here,” Nora said. “Everyone else stayed close by.”

“Your mother is a different kind of stubborn. She was always the black sheep of the family in that she was always trying to run away from who we are. She hasn’t gotten as far away as she would like. Something always pulls her back here, and she always tries to fight it.” Uncle Charlie went silent for a moment, seemingly lost in thought.

“What is it?” Nora asked.

He shook his head. “Oh, nothing. I just remembered this thing your mother used to say. ‘We come back; we always come back.’ I never understood what she meant by that. I guess I do now.”

“What was it like for you, growing up with my mother? Was she always so...”

“Cold? Crass? Difficult? Yeah, she hasn’t changed much. When she was young, she had this fire burning within her. Over the years, that fire has been dying. I can hardly see even a

spark of what she used to be anymore. I'm afraid your mother has very self-destructive tendencies. I hope it doesn't affect you kids too much."

"She drinks and she smokes and she swears, but I know, deep down, she cares about us. She seems to be her own worst enemy. I think she's afraid I will turn into her someday."

Uncle Charlie laughed. "I'm not worried about that. You're nothing like your mother. No, that's not true. I do see something of your mother in you. Her rebellious nature, I see that."

"You've got me pegged all wrong, Uncle Charlie. I'm not a rebel, I'm a nerd. I like history and photography."

"Hm." Uncle Charlie scratched his beard. "I guess I just assumed that all seventeen-year-olds have to be at least a little bit rebellious, you know? Well, you have your mother's strength, I'd bet my money on that. She's been through a lot in life, and, when most people would give up or give in, she held firm. When things got tough, she held fast. So, if anything, you got the good in her."

"What about you?"

"Me?"

"Yeah, tell me about yourself."

"Well, I suppose I'm quite the opposite. I'm pretty comfortable here and don't have any real reason to leave. I was in the army for a little while after high school, but that was about as much adventure away from home as I could handle. I got homesick. I'm sure you noticed on the drive here how vibrant the hills are this time of year. Just wait until fall, the leaves turn more colors than you ever thought possible. The lakes around here are perfect for fishing. And just wait until you see the caves. I can't believe something so mysterious forms naturally like that. You ever been in a cave before?"

Nora shook her head. “No, sir, but on our drive here I saw something called Fantastic Caverns advertised on billboard after billboard.”

“Eh, that’s just a tourist trap. It’s more fun to go spelunking. And deer hunting. You ever go deer hunting?” Uncle Charlie laughed. “Nope, I sure couldn’t leave a place like this.”

“Are the stereotypes true? The meth labs and the moonshine stills? Are those things real?”

“Well, sure. But people tend to focus on the bad things in the world. That’s why people from around here get a bad rap. Not everybody’s good, but not everybody’s bad, either. I try to think about the good that comes out of these hills. The bluegrass and the literature and *The Beverly Hillbillies*.”

“Tell me more about growing up. What was Grandfather O’Brien like?”

“He was a good man, your grandpa. Kind of like me, he enjoyed a simple life, believed that life was copacetic. He had a hardness to him, though. You see, people around here like the solitude. They become wary and suspicious of outsiders, people who don’t respect property lines. The hill folk are very superstitious; that’s where you get things like covering the mirrors and stopping the clocks. Even if you don’t believe in that stuff, you still have to do it, out of respect for those around you. When someone comes in who doesn’t follow these traditions, well, all hell can break loose. And your grandpa was very superstitious.”

“He probably didn’t get along with Mom, then. She is probably the least superstitious person I know.”

“She has her own rituals, trust me, but it wasn’t so bad. They tolerated one another, for the most part.”

“Mom never talks about Grandma. Who was she?”

Uncle Charlie scratched his beard. “I don’t remember her much. She died giving birth to your mother. Her name was also Anne. That’s one of those names that pops up in our family almost every generation. Figures your Mama wouldn’t pass it on. She hates her name. From what I know, your Mama and your Grandmama were spitting images of each other.”

Uncle Charlie stood up and stretched. “I’m gonna get a glass of water. You want some?” Nora nodded and he filled two glasses from the sink. As he passed it to her, his eyes fell upon the bullet casing around her neck. He nodded at it. “What’s that?”

“Oh, just an old necklace I found in some stuff Mom gave me.” She twisted the chain around her finger.

“Doesn’t really look like something your mother would wear.”

“No, not at all. But I like it.”

Uncle Charlie nodded. “Reminds me of this old story. Kinda the Ozarks version of Romeo and Juliet. A long time ago, there were these two young lovers. But they had to keep their affections a secret because he was from the North and she was a Southerner and, well, I’m sure you’ve studied the Civil War in school. Anyway, he’s forced to fight for the Union. However, he was not a fighter, but a lover, and he decided to fake his death in order to escape the war. He planned to let his lover in on his secret so that she could be ready for him to whisk her away, but the man carrying the letter was shot and killed before it could get to her. The man had a friend fighting for the other side who agreed to load blanks in his gun and open fire on the man in order for him to convincingly fake his death. What he didn’t realize was that the letter never reached his beloved when the time came to carry out his plan. As for the young woman, she decided to disguise herself as a soldier in order to sneak into the camp and rescue the man. Her timing was poor, however, and she ended up on the battlefield with the other soldiers. In

disguise, she was witness to his death, which she believed to be real, as he was shot with blanks by the enemy. She ran to him and, believing him to be dead, shot herself with his gun, unable to go on living without him. He opened his eyes at the sound of the shot and watched his beloved fall to the ground, dead. He too could not live without her, so he took the gun she was armed with and also shot himself. There was a funeral for the fallen and an unknown person—though we can assume it was the soldier who helped fake the man’s death—had hung around their necks the bullets that killed each other.”

Nora clutched her necklace. “That’s a sad story.”

Uncle Charlie nodded. “War is a terrible thing, but love...love can be just as destructive.”

CHAPTER 4: NOVEMBER 1882

Jack was the first to return home, where he found Ma and Pa and his wife, Naomi, sitting around the hearth. Naomi rose to fetch dry clothes for him as he stripped off his soaked garments. After he was dressed, she draped a blanket over his shoulders and ladled him some beef stew out of the pot on the fire. No one spoke as he sat down on the floor in front of the hearth.

Thomas burst through the front door soon after Jack was settled. His breath was coming in large gasps as he doubled over. Ma and Naomi rushed to his aid, wrapping him in blankets and helping him over to the seat Naomi previously occupied. He took a minute to catch his breath, but once it seemed he was almost recovered, Pa's voice broke the silence. "What happened?"

"On my way back from the cave, I heard a gunshot to the north, the path Jeremiah took."

"Are you sure it wasn't thunder?" Naomi said.

Thomas shook his head. "The thunder and lightning stopped by that point. I ran to see what happened, but I came across Charles O'Brien near the grove of dogwoods with a shotgun. He saw me, and I ran away as fast as I could. I made sure he was off my trail before I came here, but I'm worried about Jeremiah. What if Charles O'Brien shot him?"

"Those damn O'Briens. Just like them to hunt us during a burying," Pa said.

"Should we go look for Jeremiah?" Naomi asked.

"What if they killed him? What if he's out there, bleeding to death?" Ma sobbed.

Jack stood up. "I'll go look for him."

"I'll come with you." Thomas also stood.

“Stop it, all of you,” a voice boomed from the darkest corner of the house. The figure of Adeline, Ishmael’s widow, stepped out of the shadows, into the pool of light made by the fire. She was dressed in all black, mourning the death of her husband. “It was stupid to bury Ishmael tonight and put yourselves at risk, but let’s not jump to conclusions. Jeremiah is a smart boy, so even if he ran into trouble with the O’Briens, he could get himself out of it. Give him until sunrise to find his way back. Let’s wait a little longer; we’re good at that.”

Everyone returned to their seats and sat around silently for hours until the first hints of morning light could be seen on the horizon. Jack stood and lifted the rifle off its mount on the wall above the fireplace. “We’ve waited long enough.” He loaded the rifle, grabbed additional ammunition, and headed for the door.

“Please be careful,” Naomi pleaded.

He kissed her on the forehead before leaving the house, Thomas close at his heels. They retraced their steps toward the cave. They knew that Jeremiah would never tell an O’Brien the location of the cave, but that was where they would start and head north looking for him. They tried to think about all the places he would hide, but there were too many. Just when they reached the bottom, they caught sight of Jeremiah cresting the hill where the black walnut grew.

He seemed to be in a daze and did not respond as they waved their arms and called out to him. He dragged his feet, which caused him to slightly stumble down the hill. They ran towards him and as they got closer, they saw that he was covered in blood. He collapsed into their arms just as they reached him, and once they determined that he was uninjured, they carried him back to the house.

After Ma and Naomi got over the shock of seeing him covered in blood, they dressed him in clean clothes and put him to bed. Jeremiah slept all day, leaving the Walshs to wonder what had happened to him.

* * *

Jeremiah gasped for breath and awoke in his bed. He sat up and for a moment, unable recall the events that had transpired, but they all rushed back in an instant, and he found himself needing to lie back down. He closed his eyes, hoping he had only dreamed it all, but he knew in his heart that he had killed Annie O'Brien.

“What was it that you said to me? ‘We come back; we always come back’?”

Jeremiah turned his head to find a figure sitting on the edge of the bed, her back to him. She turned, a hint of a smile on her lips, the closest she ever came to smiling. “Why did you do it, Jeremiah?” Annie asked.

CHAPTER 5: PRESENT DAY

Nora was greeted by her mother's protests regarding their situation echoing off the walls. "We cannot stay here. This place is dismal. I can't expect the kids to live without Internet, let alone electricity or plumbing." She followed her mother's voice to find Anne and Steve seated at the dining room table near a window overlooking the lake. The sun was starting its decent, making the water shimmer.

"We can tolerate one night here, just until we can figure out other arrangements," Steve said, always level-headed.

Anne took a drag on her cigarette. She exhaled with a sigh. "I can't stay here. Not even one night."

Steve stood up. "Fine, I'll figure something out." He pulled his phone out of his pocket and strode past Nora and out the door.

"We're not staying?" Nora asked, sitting down.

Anne let out a breath of smoke. "I have so many memories of this place, most of them painful. I'm not gonna pretend that they don't bother me. I'm not gonna put you and your siblings through the same childhood I had."

"What was so bad about it?" Nora asked. The question hung in the air like the smoke from Anne's cigarette. They watched a pontoon boat glide through the water below, and Nora wondered what could be so terrible in such a beautiful place. "I know you want to protect me, but you can tell me. I want to know."

“Not now. I’m tired.” Anne extinguished her cigarette in the ashtray sitting on the table. “I’m going to go lie down.” She stood up and left the room. Nora heard the door to her room shut before she, too, stood and went to explore more of the house.

* * *

Olly was not in their room where she had left him, but the French doors were open, a breeze billowing through the curtains, and Nora stepped out onto the balcony. Below her was the front lawn, the dogs sunbathing in the grass, the light bouncing off the cars parked on the gravel drive. She could see the collapsed barn and the row of trees that welcomed them up to the house.

“Hey,” a voice startled her, coming from above. Nora turned to see Olly sitting on the roof, his video game still in hand.

“How’d you get up there?”

Olly pointed to a trellis overgrown with ivy that ran all the way up the side of the house to where he sat. “Come on up.”

Nora climbed, doing her best not to look down, and she came to sit beside him. “Still hunting giants?”

“Nah, I switched to killing zombies, but my battery’s about to die.”

“Uncle Charlie has electricity in his RV; he’d probably let you charge it.”

“For real?”

Nora nodded. “I like Uncle Charlie.”

“Is he as big of a redneck as he looks?”

Nora shrugged. “I don’t know, I guess. I mean, he says he’s lived here his whole life.”

“We wouldn’t know what that’s like, huh?”

“I think it would be nice to stay in one place, at least for a while.”

“Somewhere like here?”

“I don’t know. What do you think of this place?”

Olly turned off his game and put it away. “I don’t know. This house is kinda creepy. There are dead animal heads and photographs of dead people on the walls. I feel like I’m constantly being watched. And everything is so dark and cold. The cellar smells awful. I was trying to get away from Ben and Bea and it smells like something died down there.”

“You think?”

“Probably.”

“Well, clearly someone enjoyed taxidermy as a hobby. Do you think it’s a dead animal?”

“If it is, it’s probably a grizzly bear. I’m not kidding. It smells like rotting flesh.”

“Oh, shut up. You don’t know what rotting flesh smells like. Let’s go check it out,” Nora said, starting down the trellis towards the balcony.

“Seriously, it reeks. You don’t wanna go down there.”

“You scared?”

Olly frowned and followed her. They made their way through the house, down the stairs, through the kitchen and out the back door to the cellar. “There was a padlock and some chains around the door handles, but they weren’t secure,” Olly said. He opened them and the stench of something putrid hit their nostrils. They covered their noses and mouths. Olly gagged and closed the doors.

“Pew,” Nora said, fanning the air.

“See?”

“Smells like two dead bears to me.” Nora untied the flannel shirt she had wrapped around her waist and knotted it around her face in a makeshift mask.

“Whoa, seriously? You’re nuts.”

“Come on, scaredy-cat.”

Olly took off his shirt and wrapped it around his nose and mouth and followed Nora into the cellar. It was dark, and they pulled out their cell phones to illumine their path. There were at least a dozen wood stairs that lead down to the packed earth floor. As far as they could see were shelves of preserves and supplies. As they made their way in deeper, they saw that there was a low table in the center of the room. Something was on top of it, covered in a sheet. Nora reached out to pull back the sheet, but Olly grabbed her hand. “Don’t,” he nodded at the shape, holding his phone higher so that it revealed more. Whatever the sheet was concealing was at least six feet long and was the likely culprit of the putrid stench.

“Stop trying to scare me, it’s not–,” But as she lifted the sheet, Nora found herself staring into the decomposing face of a man long dead, with coins on his eyes and a toothy maw riddled with maggots. She and Olly let out a simultaneous scream. They ran out of the basement and right into Uncle Charlie.

“For God sakes, what were you thinking, going down there?” he said, seeing the horror on their faces after they ripped off their makeshift masks.

“What the hell?!” Olly was shouting. “What the fuck is that all about?”

Nora doubled over and threw up in the grass. She wiped her mouth and stared at them wide-eyed. “That’s messed up. You could have told us that you were keeping Grandpa’s body in the cellar.”

Olly also went wide-eyed. “You mean that was–? Holy shit.”

Uncle Charlie held up his hands in defense. Anne came stomping around the side of the house, her hair mussed, angry to be awoken from her nap. “What the hell was all that screaming?”

“Grandpa’s corpse is in the cellar,” Olly blurted, and Anne was suddenly fuming.

“What?!” She started towards the cellar, but was quickly overcome by the smell and retreated. “What the fuck, Charles? Why hasn’t he been taken to a morgue?”

“The closest funeral home is an hour away, and no one would come out this far. Since he had already been dead in the house for a week before I found him, I didn’t think it would be a problem to keep him down here.”

“Jesus Christ.” Anne grabbed Nora and Olly by the wrists. “That’s it! We are leaving! Get your stuff and get in the car!”

Anne went back inside without another word to round up the twins and find Steve. They packed the cars as fast as they could and left just as the sun was setting. Nora looked back to see Uncle Charlie standing alone in the yard, his shoulders slumped as he watched them leave. He turned and retreated to his RV as they passed through the gate, back onto the paved road, far away from Grandpa O’Brien’s house of horrors.

CHAPTER 6: NOVEMBER 1882

Jeremiah was plagued by nightmares. He awoke in the middle of the night with a scream, sweat pooling on his brow, heart pounding, trying to steady his breathing. It always woke Thomas, who slept in the same room. Sometimes other members of the family bolted into the room, not knowing it was just a bad dream that brought Jeremiah such distress.

During the day, he was not himself, not since he had taken the life of Annie O'Brien. He dragged his feet and was easily startled. He hardly ate and didn't say much to anyone. His actions had caused not only grief to himself, but the entire Walsh clan. Annie was the youngest of the O'Briens, and her murder was certain to be met with retaliation.

They were constantly on their toes, knowing that at any moment the O'Briens could pounce on them. The O'Briens were hunters, outnumbering them, armed with better weapons and hunting dogs. The Walsh family had to be prepared for anything, and they gathered nightly to strategize. They scheduled shifts to stand guard so that they were never vulnerable to an attack, even at night. No one had witnessed the killing, only Jeremiah, and no one knew where he had buried the body, and they intended to keep it that way. But everyone was worried for Jeremiah's safety, as he was the likely target if they were to retaliate.

While they strengthened their defenses, Adeline counted down the days to the resurrection. "One thousand and eighty-three," she said.

Naomi frowned. "We are closer to another resurrection, Adeline, don't you forget that." She insisted that the resurrection was the key to their defense against the O'Brien clan.

Pa agreed but was concerned about revealing the location of the cave. "We can't risk letting the O'Briens know where it is. By now they have figured out when the day of resurrection

will fall. And that is when they will attack. They are always keeping track of us, just as much as we are keeping track of them.”

But the day of resurrection was close at hand, and they had to make a decision. “I’m going,” Jack said. “We have waited long enough. I know how to get there on my own.”

Naomi nodded. “I will go with you.”

Jack did not protest, and they looked at the faces of their family to see if anyone would join them. Thomas agreed, but Pa, Ma, and Adeline would stay and protect the farm. Jeremiah rose from where he had been sitting in the corner, completely silent, and nodded at them. “I’m going, too.”

* * *

The moon was full as Jack, Thomas, Naomi, and Jeremiah slunk through the darkness towards the cave. “Maybe we should split up?” Thomas suggested. Everyone looked at Jeremiah warily, but he didn’t notice.

“Naomi and I will head east. You and Jeremiah should approach from the west,” Jack said. They nodded and separated, on alert for anything that might suggest they were being followed. It was a roundabout route, but Jack and Naomi made it to the cave without incident.

Just as Thomas and Jeremiah were nearing, they heard the sound of dogs howling. Without a word, they separated from each other, moving as far away from the cave as they could in opposite directions of each other.

Thomas headed deep into the woods, the sound of the dogs receding. He stopped and crouched near a large rock formation to catch his breath. He listened and heard nothing except the sounds of the night, the wind rustling the trees and the nocturnal animals and insects coming out to mate and feed. He did not know what to do next. He could return home, but then the others

would have to perform the resurrection ritual without him. Or he could proceed cautiously towards the cave. He waited, still listening, for a time, before heading back in the direction he had come from.

* * *

Jeremiah could hear the dogs, their barks and howls getting louder as he ran. They had his scent and were closing in. He had to evade them somehow. He was not paying attention to where he was going and he did not stop, even when it felt like his lungs would burst. He did not realize where he was until the black walnut tree loomed above him. He did not pause until he had scrambled up. The dogs had followed him and now paced along the base of the tree, whining. One dog growled and barked, trying to claw its way up the trunk towards him, but to no avail. Jeremiah caught his breath and stared down at them. He hoped they would give up and leave, but it didn't look like they planned on retreating anytime soon. Jeremiah picked walnuts off the branches and hurled them at the dogs, but it only agitated them more. They snarled and showed their teeth, stark white spikes in the moonlight.

He had done a bad thing, he knew, but he did the only thing he could do in order to survive. He put his face in his hands, thinking about the last time he had been on the top of this hill. His tears fell like the rain had that night. Jeremiah couldn't live with it. He was carrying the pistol, the same one he shot Annie with, and he drew it and weighed it in his hands. He held it up to his temple and closed his eyes.

A laugh. Not friendly, more of a scoff, but enough to make him open his eyes. Annie sat there, on the tree branch next to him. "Are you gonna kill yourself, Jeremiah?"

He blinked. "I—"

Annie scoffed again. “Our families are constantly trying to kill each other. Kill or get killed, that’s our world. That’s how it works, Jeremiah. You think you can’t live with what you did to me, but you have to. I won’t let you kill yourself. You aren’t allowed to die, not yet. Not until I come back and kill you myself.” Annie threw up an arm and knocked the gun out of his hand. It fell to the ground, and it went off. The shot startled the dogs, and they ran away. Jeremiah watched them run off, and when he looked up, Annie was gone. He slowly climbed down, out of the tree and headed towards the cave.

He found the pool of water and rather than wading in, he let his whole body be immersed. The cold water brought him back to his senses, and he made his way deep into the cave. Naomi and Jack had already lit the lanterns. Thomas was there, too. They were waiting for him, Jack no longer confident in his ability to find the main cavern through the twisting tunnels. Naomi rushed to embrace him, and she held his wet face in her hands. “Are you okay? Thomas told us about the O’Brien’s dogs.”

Jeremiah nodded. “I’m fine.” He pulled away from her and led them into the tunnels. Once in the main cavern, he led them towards the opposite side of Annie’s grave, to stand over a different plot:

Floyd Walsh

November 21, 1879

The rest joined him around the grave and got to work. Jack said the prayer, but the words were different from the burial prayer. Once he was done, he grabbed a shovel and started to dig. They did not dig very long with shovels, they quickly switched to spades and then their bare hands. They scooped the clay out of the grave and soon a small hand was visible. They uncovered the entire body, gently, but as quickly as possible. Once it was completely visible,

Jack lifted the body out of the grave and gently laid it out on the flat earth. Naomi cradled the head in her lap and started to unravel the linen tied around it. It fell away and revealed the face of a boy, younger than Jeremiah. He looked asleep, his face peaceful, no sign that he had been dead for three years. Naomi started to sing. It was a song they all knew, about death and resurrection. When she finished, Naomi spoke, "Come back, my boy. Come back." She breathed on him, and, slowly, Floyd's eyes fluttered open. He took a huge gulp of air, like he had been underwater, and rolled over to cough, the life returning to his body. When he was able to breathe normally, he looked up. Naomi and Jack had tears in their eyes, their arms outstretched to embrace him. He fell into their arms, and they cried and laughed and kissed each other. Jeremiah just watched them, but soon turned to notice that Thomas had moved on to another grave.

"Come on, we still have a lot of work to do." Thomas said.

CHAPTER 7: PRESENT DAY

The roads were much scarier at night. They took sharp twists and turns through the hills and trees, and Nora thought they could hit a deer at any moment. She stared out the windshield, watching the headlights illuminate another unexpected bend in the road. The drive did not seem to bother Steve, and Anne was ranting in the passenger seat about how morbid of a trip this had turned into and how her brother was responsible if Nora and Olly suffered psychological damage and how she should have never dragged the whole family out to these “god-forsaken hills.” Olly and the twins followed behind them as they made their way towards the hotel.

Nora should have known better than to expect a shabby motel on the side of the road. They had passed many on their journey, precariously close to the road and even more precariously teetering at the edge of the hill. She imagined they had roaches and stained sheets and leaky shower heads. As they wound their way up the road, it reminded Nora of the opening scene to *The Shining*. A huge, glitzy hotel stood at the top of the hill like an impenetrable fortress. Nora couldn't believe her eyes. It was practically a castle, with more windows than she could count and a pointed roof that pierced the night sky. Steve parked the car, and they climbed the hill to the entrance. The inside was even more extravagant than the outside; a manmade river ran through the lobby, a tree grew out of the center of the room, and real fish and birds flew and swam within the hotel. Beatrice and Benjamin tried to chase some ducks around the room, but a sharp scolding from Anne made them fold their hands behind their backs and stay silent. Steve checked in while they walked around the lobby. There was an indoor pool, a fitness room, and even a movie theater. Nora was so entranced that she almost forgot about the horrors of the day, but they flooded back for a minute. She looked to Olly, who was a different quiet than usual. Not

a quiet accompanied by video game sound effects, but a blank-stare silence. She felt guilty for calling him scared. “Kind of tacky, but I shouldn’t complain,” Anne said, looking around, snapping Nora back to the present.

“Mom, we’re hungry,” Ben said, tugging at the leg of her pants. He and Bea showed their sad puppy eyes, and she cursed under her breath.

“I think the snack bar is still open,” Steve said, pointing across the lobby at a little kiosk with a tired-looking boy at the register. “Go ahead and get whatever you want. I’ll pay.” The twins cheered and raced each other to the counter.

Anne never showed much appreciation towards anyone, but for a moment she exchanged a look with Steve that said “thanks.” He handed her their room key, and she announced that she was going to retire to her room for the night. Then, more quietly, she asked if Steve could grab her a couple of those mini bottles of Jack Daniel’s.

Beatrice wanted a big bag of M&M’s, and Benjamin wanted saltwater taffy. When Steve suggested they get something that wouldn’t keep them up all night, they whined. “Tell you what. I’ll buy you the M&M’s and the taffy tomorrow. Tonight, let’s get something that won’t give you a sugar rush.” They decided on popcorn, potato chips and apple slices. “What about you guys? Can I get you anything?” Olly shook his head.

“No thanks,” Nora said, thinking about how she had already expelled the contents of her stomach and didn’t want to experience it again.

As Steve dug through his wallet for money to pay, the boy at the snack bar smiled at her. He had a row of brilliant white teeth and a nametag that just said “J.” Nora blushed and tucked a piece of hair behind her ear.

“Have a good night,” he said as they started to walk away, but his eyes were on Nora.

They rode the glass elevator up to the fifth floor, the twins giggling the whole way. Steve had paid for two rooms. The twins begged to be in the room with him and Anne, so he gave Olly the keycards for the room he and Nora would share. They found their respective rooms and collapsed on the beds.

“You okay?” Nora asked Olly, once they were alone.

He was face-down on the made bed. He turned his head to look at her. “Yeah, are you?”

Nora shrugged. “Yeah. Still a little shook up.” They sat in silence for a moment. “I’m sorry,” she finally said.

“Sorry? About what?”

“I don’t know. Everything.”

Olly stood up. “Let’s just forget about it, okay?” He went into the bathroom and shut the door. Nora heard him turn on the shower.

“Yeah, okay.”

* * *

Nora had a hard time sleeping. She lay awake, staring at the ceiling while Olly snored in the other bed. She lay there until the sun rose high into the sky and burned her eyes as it found the small gap in the curtains.

Steve knocked on the door. “They’re serving breakfast in the lobby until ten.”

Olly got up without a word, threw on some clothes and was out the door. Nora took her time getting ready. She stared at herself in the mirror above the bathroom sink for a good minute. Her eyes betrayed her lack of sleep, and she dabbed on just enough makeup to pass as awake. She dressed and made her way to the glass elevator. Stepping off the elevator, she passed Steve

and her siblings. They were going back upstairs to change into their swimsuits to take advantage of the pool. “If you hurry, they’re still serving breakfast for a few more minutes,” Steve said.

It wasn’t a continental breakfast like many of the hotels Nora had been to. It was like a restaurant. She was seated and waited on by people dressed in all black except for their starched, white aprons. She ordered bacon and scrambled eggs and watched the koi in the water while she waited for her food.

“Coffee, Ma’am?” She looked up to see the boy from the snack bar holding a pot. He flashed her that bright smile. He was probably about her age, with shaggy brown hair and tan skin, like he was out in the sun all the time. “No offense, but it looks like you need it.”

Nora groaned. “Don’t suppose you could sneak me a mimosa? That’s what I really need.”

The boy laughed and filled the mug on the table with coffee. “Afraid not.”

He walked away to wait on another table and Nora sipped the coffee. It was bitter, but it was warm and made her eyes feel less heavy. Her food arrived, and she realized she was starving as she shoveled bacon and scrambled eggs into her mouth. When finished with that, she ordered a short stack of pancakes. The boy came by again to refill her coffee. “How long are you staying at the Chateau?” he asked.

Nora paused, just before she could shove a syrup-soaked bite of pancake into her mouth. “The what?”

The boy smiled. “The Chateau on the Lake. That’s the name of this hotel.”

“Oh,” Nora blushed. “Um, I don’t know. My family is in town for my grandfather’s funeral.”

The boy frowned. “I’m so sorry to hear that.”

She waved her hand. “No, it’s okay; I never met him.”

“The reason I was asking is because some buddies of mine are taking a pontoon out on the lake tomorrow afternoon. There will be plenty of beer to go around, if you’re down.”

Nora looked at him. “Are you asking me out?”

The boy shrugged. “Well, sure.”

“I’m sure you ask a lot of girls to the lake.”

“Just the pretty ones.”

She laughed and took a sip of the coffee. It burned her tongue. “I’m Nora.”

“Nice ta meetcha, Miss Nora. My name’s Jeremiah, but you can call me J.”

CHAPTER 8: NOVEMBER 1882

Three Walshes were resurrected that night; Floyd, Silas, and Bernadette. Their deaths had been tragic. There was a family picnic along the river, Floyd and Silas were in a canoe fishing and Bernadette was on the shore, cleaning and cooking the fish with the other women. No one saw exactly what happened, but suddenly the canoe tipped, and the boys were swept downstream. Bernadette jumped into the water, trying to save them, but was also swept away. All three drowned, and their bodies were eventually recovered in the delta. They were buried in the secret family plot following the ritual that would preserve them for three years until they could be resurrected during a full moon. Jack and Naomi were reunited with their ten-year-old son, Floyd, and twelve-year-old son, Silas. And Jack, Thomas, and Jeremiah were reunited with their sister, Bernadette.

They exchanged hugs and kisses. “Where’s Ma? Where’s Pa?” Bernadette asked.

“Ma and Pa are fine,” Thomas reassured her.

“And Ishmael? Where is he?”

Thomas hung his head. “There was a duel between Ishmael and Charles O’Brien. Ishmael lost, but he is buried here and will be resurrected someday.”

Bernadette nodded. “Have we lost anyone else?”

“Sugar got bit by a copperhead a couple summers ago. Not sure if resurrection rituals work on cats, but Naomi insisted that we give it a go.”

“I’m afraid we will have to save the catching up for later. Right now, we need to focus on getting everyone back to the farm safely. Jeremiah was chased by the O’Brien’s dogs on the way here. We know they are watching us. No matter what happens, we can’t let them know where the

cave is, understood?” Jack started leading everyone out of the cave, Floyd and Silas clinging to Naomi, Thomas and Jeremiah following. Jeremiah glanced behind him to see if Bernadette was coming, but she was stooped, looking at a small grave hidden near the back of the cave.

His heart pounded. “Hurry, Bernadette,” he said. She looked up at him, a confused, almost pitying look in her eyes.

“Okay, I’m coming.”

They extinguished the lights and split up once they left the cave, Thomas, Naomi and Silas one way, Jack and Floyd another, and Jeremiah with Bernadette. The sky was just beginning to lighten, and they moved quickly, hoping to make it back before the sun was fully in the sky. No one spoke until the farm was in sight.

“Jeremiah,” Bernadette whispered. “I saw something peculiar in the cave, just before we left.” Jeremiah’s heart hammered. “I could have sworn one of the grave markers had Annie O’Brien’s name on it. Oh, listen to me, that’s silly. Why would an O’Brien be buried in the cave?” But she gave him a knowing look, and he grabbed her arm.

“You can’t tell anyone. Please, Bernadette.”

“Why shouldn’t I? They’re our sworn enemies.”

“I killed her. I didn’t mean to, but I did, and now I can’t live with myself.”

“So, what do you plan to do? Resurrect her?”

“I don’t know, maybe.”

Bernadette stopped and stared at him. “This isn’t good, Jeremiah. If someone, anyone, besides me found out about this...well, let’s just say you might not have the luxury of being resurrected when you die.”

“I know.” They walked home in silence. Everyone made it back safely, and the resurrected were met with celebration. Ma made a big dinner, and Pa played the flute and the Walshes danced until sunset. Not everyone was celebrating. Adeline spent the day in her room, only appearing to eat supper. Jeremiah sat quietly in the corner, watching the celebration and exchanging glances with Bernadette. If there was a soul Jeremiah could trust with a secret, it was his sister. Bernadette would keep Jeremiah’s secret, to the grave and back again.

CHAPTER 9: PRESENT DAY

Nora's heart was pounding the rest of the day. How could she agree to go out with a boy she had just met? Maybe Uncle Charlie was right. Maybe she did have a little rebel in her. She spent the morning at the pool with her family. Anne planted herself in a lounge chair, wearing her big sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat, reading a magazine and only getting up to order drinks from the pool-side bar. Steve played lifeguard, making sure the twins weren't running, stayed in the shallow end, applied sunscreen, and made sure that their arm floaties were inflated. Nora and Olly raced each other, played Marco Polo, and eventually retired to the hot tub. "Olly, wanna hear a secret?" Nora asked.

He looked at her with suspicion. "I don't know, do I?"

Nora giggled. "I think you do, but I can't tell you here. I'll tell you later, when we go back to the room."

Anne announced that pool time was over. "I'm burning to a crisp. We should go back to our rooms, get dressed and go out for lunch." They took a detour through the giftshop on the way back up to their rooms, so that Steve could keep his promise and buy Beatrice and Benjamin the candy they wanted the night before. "You guys want anything?" he asked Nora and Olly. Nora picked up a cheap paperback advertised as "an Ozark's mystery" and Olly got some headphones because Anne kept complaining that his games were too loud.

Back in their room, Nora changed out of her swimsuit in the bathroom and hung it in the shower to dry. She put on a sundress and toweled off her hair. Olly was dressed and lying on the bed, playing video games. He looked up at her. "So?"

“Olly!” She flung herself onto the bed next to him. “You would do anything for me, right?”

He eyed her suspiciously. “That depends, I guess.”

“Do you remember the guy from the snack bar?”

“No.”

“Well, he was at breakfast this morning, and he asked me out on a date.”

Olly laughed. “Uh-huh, sure.”

“Stop, I’m serious. He’s going to the lake with some friends tomorrow afternoon, and he invited me to tag along.”

Olly turned the game off and sat up. “Let me get this straight. A total stranger asks you out on a date to the lake to hang out with a group of more strangers and, let me guess, you want me to give you my blessing and cover for you when Mom asks where you’ve disappeared to?”

“Yeah, basically.”

“Um, no. Sorry.”

“Please, Olly? It’s just one afternoon.”

“Nora, how do I know that this guy isn’t, like, a vampire or something. And his group of friends are the Lost Boys. That will go over real well with Mom when I explain that you have joined an underground gang of the undead.”

“Shut up. You’ve been watching too many movies. J seems nice and—”

“J? That’s his name? Sounds like he doesn’t want you to know who he really is.”

“His name is Jeremiah, and he’s really cute. Please, Olly? Just this once?”

Olly groaned. “Dammit, Nora. I’ll think about it.”

“You can’t tell anyone, Olly. Especially Mom. Promise?”

“Fine, I promise I won’t tell anyone, but that doesn’t mean you’re going.”

Steve knocked on the door. “Are you dressed? We should get going.”

* * *

They had lunch on a college campus, which Nora thought was an unusual place to eat. It looked like a large log cabin, with a fountain out front, and a hotel inside. The restaurant was in a ballroom with polished wood floors, copper ceiling tiles, a stone fireplace, and big windows overlooking the campus. Nora stepped onto a balcony to snap a picture of a chapel with views of the hills in the background. A pianist was alternating between hymns and Disney songs while they were waited on by students in white coats. What started off as a rough trip for a funeral had turned into a luxury vacation. Anne seemed to be attempting to make up for what had happened at Grandfather O’Brien’s and she spared no expense. She did, however, complain that there were no alcoholic beverages on the menu, while Beatrice and Benjamin dared each other to lick the ice sculpture slowly melting in the middle of the restaurant. Steve, Olly, and Nora ate silently. After lunch they took a walk before driving back to the hotel. “This afternoon, Steve and I would like to hit the spa,” Anne announced. “Olly, why don’t you and your siblings see a movie this afternoon?”

“Um, okay,” Olly replied.

“And tomorrow, I’m afraid we will have to go back to your grandfather’s house to make arrangements. Of course, only Steve and I have to go. You can take your siblings to a museum or a park or something.”

No one was excited to go back to Grandfather O’Brien’s house, so Olly agreed to babysit the twins. “Maybe we’ll go to the lake,” Olly said, shooting Nora a look.

“That’s an excellent idea, dear,” Anne said. She and Steve retreated to the spa. On their way towards the movie theater, Nora spotted J at the snack bar.

“There he is, Olly,” she whispered. “That’s J.”

Olly strode towards the snack bar, towing the twins behind him. J flashed his brilliant smile, and Olly retaliated with a frown. “How can I help you today, Sir?” the boy asked.

“Tell me, what were your intentions when you asked my sister out on a date?”

“Olly,” Nora hissed, embarrassed.

J started at him for a moment and then nodded. “You must be Nora’s older brother. I can assure you that my only intention was that I wanted to get to know her better.”

Olly narrowed his eyes. “You seem like a smart guy, so maybe you can understand why I’m not comfortable with a stranger taking my sister to the lake to hang out with other strangers.”

J nodded. “I understand completely. Which is why I would like to extend my invitation to you and the rest of your family.”

It was clear that Olly had not expected this. He doubled back. “Where on the lake did you plan on taking my sister?”

“Just north of Moonshine Beach, which you can see from here. My friend Andy Southwood owns a pontoon. We planned on grilling some burgers, maybe do some tubing, but mostly just hanging out. There will probably be beer, if that makes you uncomfortable, but nothing crazy. I can give you Andy’s address.”

“Olly,” Ben whined. “We’re going to miss the movie.”

“What time does your shift end, J?” Olly asked.

“I’m done at five, why?”

“Because you and I are gonna get together at the deli for a cup of coffee as soon as you’re done with work, and we are gonna talk more about this.”

J nodded. “I will see you after five, then.” As the siblings walked towards the theater, J called after them. “Enjoy your movie!”

* * *

Nora played card games with the twins in her hotel room while Olly and J met for coffee at the deli. There was a knock at the door, and she jumped, but it was just Anne and Steve returning from the spa. “I’m going to take a shower, and then we will figure out what we want to do about dinner.” Anne said. “Where’s Olly?”

“Um...at the arcade, I think,” Nora replied.

Anne nodded. “Text your brother to be back up here in fifteen minutes.” With that, Anne and Steve took the twins and returned to their room.

Nora pulled out her phone to text Olly, but before she could send a message, the lock beeped as he used his keycard to enter the room. “How did it go?” she blurted.

“I swear if he or his friends seem the least bit creepy or vampiric, you call me right away and I’m going to come get you.”

Nora paused. “Wait, you mean you’ll let me go?”

“Yes, but—”

Nora kissed his head. “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”

“Wait, let me finish. I have a few conditions. One, you stay at the lake. No parties at stranger’s houses or trailers or whatever. Gotta pee? Find a public restroom. Two, stick to the group. Don’t be alone with this guy. No matter how charming he is, remember that you don’t

really know him. Three, don't eat or drink anything that isn't pre-packaged. I don't want you getting roofied. Four, don't do anything Mom wouldn't approve of."

"Like drinking and smoking?"

Olly rolled his eyes. "For my sake, please be safe and don't do something that impairs your judgement. Please, Nora."

"Have I ever gotten in trouble for anything?"

"No, but let's keep it that way, okay? Five, don't be out past sunset. You know, vampires. And six, call me if anything is amiss. I am going to be worried sick about you the whole time, you know."

"I promise I will text you and send you pictures every hour so you know I am still alive and well."

"Every half-hour would be preferable."

"Thank you, Olly. I owe you."

"Yeah, yeah. I can see you're crazy about this guy. We had a good chat and he seems really into you."

"Really?"

"Ugh. I'm not talking about this with you."

* * *

The next morning Nora finished packing a bag for the lake and headed towards the door.

"Got your phone?"

"Yes."

"Room key?"

"Yes."

“Pepper spray?”

“Bye, Olly.” And she was gone.

CHAPTER 10: NOVEMBER 1882

When Annie visited him, Jeremiah knew he was dreaming. She appeared like a flash of lightning, burning hot with rage, but gone as soon as she appeared. She was at the bottom of the well when he went to draw water, she was in the corner of the cellar when he went to get a jar of pickles, she was buried up to her neck in the garden as he pulled weeds. And she would always say the same thing, "I'm going to kill you, Jeremiah."

But sometimes she was a lingering whisper, a figure floating on the surface of the pond where they used to catch frogs, or fast asleep on a bed of wildflowers in the field where he had kissed her for the first time. "I love you, Jeremiah. But you can't tell anyone," she would mumble in her sleep. Those moments pained him more than the others, and guilt washed over him as constant as the tide.

Bernadette noticed when her brother stopped suddenly and stared at nothing. When he talked to himself in secretive whispers. When he fell to his knees in uncontrollable sobs. She knew what it was that plagued him, because having stepped briefly into the supernatural realm herself, she knew how powerful the spirits of the dead could be. As a ghost, she visited a woman she had loved, as often as she could. But her presence drove the woman mad and she had hung herself. Bernadette felt guilty, knew what her brother was going through, but she did not want him to suffer the same fate. Night after night, once Jeremiah was asleep, Bernadette prayed over him, pleading that Annie's spirit would leave him. But Jeremiah's condition worsened; he would vomit and break out in a fever and cry out in pain. Still, Bernadette persisted with her ritual and one night, Annie appeared to her.

"You leave my brother alone, you hear me?"

Annie frowned. "I will not. Not until he agrees to bring me back."

Bernadette looked at her, puzzled. Annie smirked. "You're surprised. He loved me, and he regrets killing me. So why wouldn't he bring me back? I'll tell you why. Because he thinks things would be better if we were both dead. I'm here, not just to convince him to resurrect me, but to keep him from killing himself."

"If I promise to bring you back, will you leave him alone?" Bernadette asked.

Annie stared at her. "I'll leave him alone, if you promise to bring me back and keep him safe from himself."

Bernadette nodded. "I promise."

CHAPTER 11: PRESENT DAY

J was standing by his truck, idling in the circle drive of the hotel. He had changed out of his uniform and was wearing jeans, a T-shirt, a trucker hat, and cowboy boots. He smiled as Nora approached and opened the passenger door for her.

“Thank you.” She touched his arm before climbing in. He jumped into the driver’s seat and they coasted down the hill, towards the lake.

“Do you like country music?” he asked.

Nora shrugged. “I haven’t listened to much.”

“Well, I hope you can at least tolerate it, because my pal Nick will be playing it on the radio the whole time.” He turned up the music. “I like this one.”

It sounded like every other country song Nora had heard. Trucks, beer, church, girls, not necessarily in that order. But she could admit that it was kind of catchy.

“So, where are you from, Miss Nora?” he practically shouted over the sound of the music and his truck engine.

She laughed. “All over. My mom is restless. Says she can’t stay in one place for too long. Most recently, I’m from San Francisco.”

J whistled. “West coast, huh? I hear they’ve got great surfing.”

Nora nodded. “And earthquakes.”

J laughed. “Round here, we got just about everything else. Tornadoes, floods, no volcanoes or hurricanes, though. So, I guess we got that going for us.”

“Sorry about my brother yesterday.”

“Hey, can’t blame a guy for looking out for his sister. I’ve got an older sister myself, and she’s basically my best friend, so I get it. She’ll be there, at the lake, I mean.”

“I can’t wait to meet her. What’s her name?”

“Bernie. You’ll like her.”

It did not take long to get to the beach. J parked his truck in the driveway of what Nora assumed was Andy’s house. There were already half a dozen cars parked there. They walked down the hill to the boat dock.

She could hear laughter and music and the smell of burgers on the grill filled her nose; it was inviting but made her heart pound in her ears. The slip held a dozen boats, all of them bobbing in the water like ducks wearing sheets. A group of people, mostly boys, were gathered at the very end of the dock. A boy manned the black charcoal grill, a few boys had their toes in the water, while the others congregated at a picnic table or on the uncovered pontoon boat still docked in the last slip.

Nora immediately looked for the girls of the group. One girl, who couldn’t be more than a hundred pounds soaking wet, was getting her shoulders lathered in sunscreen by a boy twice her size at the picnic table. A girl on the pontoon was already making out with a boy, and there was another girl, tall and older than everyone else, holding a beer and looking out at the lake, so Nora couldn’t see her face.

The boy at the grill looked up and saw them first. He called out to Jeremiah and a few heads turned in their direction. Nora reached for his hand, nervously, and he let her take it.