

Chapter I: Secrets

Ebenezer Broward had secrets, the best kept of which was the 85-year-old recluse's immense wealth. To his neighbors and the other residents of Keeling Township, he was a hunchbacked, penny-pinching miser who never spent more than he had to and bought only what was absolutely essential to fulfill his basic needs.

On his regular visits to the local mom-and-pop grocery store, Broward always wore a patched, moth-eaten suit jacket that could very well have been a hand-me-down from his grandfather; a beaver-fur top hat he found discarded in a trash bin when he was still in the orphanage; and his signature red, wool scarf, faded to a dull, brick hue; and he paid for everything from a cloth coin purse he carried in a breast pocket, fishing out crusty quarter pieces, pennies and dimes with bony, crack-nailed fingers. Most of the coins and tattered bills appeared to have been found on the ground, plucked from gutters and drainage grates.

Broward's mouse-grey hair stuck out from beneath his top hat in crooked, wiry strands. His beady, deep-set eyes glowed with buried secrets above a prominent, beak-like nose.

Store clerks often believed him to be homeless; most were certain he was a pauper, perhaps even a beggar. If you troubled to ask any of them what the old man ate, they would say only soup and crackers, for that was all he ever seemed to buy.

He did not own a car and only shopped at stores within walking distance of his ramshackle home, which was surrounded by trees and hedges. The yard, at least—such that it was—was well kept. He mowed it regularly with an antique push mower and trimmed the hedges with a pair of rusty, wooden-handled clippers.

Nor did he own a television. Or a telephone. Or a computer or any other modern electronic device. He was cut off and isolated from everything save his immediate surroundings, the only influx of information coming from the newspaper delivered daily to his doorstep, a

throwback to a time before the Internet brought the world to people's fingertips.

And so his secrets were easily kept. Broward was not at all what people believed. He was, in fact, a billionaire, having inherited a healthy sum from his oil tycoon father, who, feeling guilty about neither acknowledging Broward nor visiting him at the orphanage, left to him all of his liquid assets.

Broward, being both a clever and well-educated young man, turned that wealth into an enormous fortune through shrewd investments and miserliness.

Before he got old, Broward traveled the world and studied—history, archaeology, art, science, anthropology, folklore. Under a pseudonym, he published many scholarly articles on mythology, folklore and castles. Though he never made a single public appearance or gave a single lecture on any subject, he was recognized—his alter ego, at any rate—as the world's foremost expert on castle lore.

His travels and studies ultimately led to his second best-kept secret.

Right there in Keeling Township, unknown to anyone save those who performed the actual labor, Broward had built a massive castle. Its foundation was an underground structure, an ancient stone temple built by a race of people long forgotten in the river of time. Broward himself was one of only a few scholars who even knew of these peoples, and he alone had discovered the proof of their existence in the form of the temple, eons ago swallowed by the earth right there in Keeling Township only a quarter of a mile from Broward's broken down home on Finley Street. In fact, it was nearly in his backyard.

After excavating the ruins, Broward had built on top of it his very own castle, the stones transported brick-by-brick from their original location in Europe and erected in Keeling Township by a team of laborers assembled from all parts of the world during Broward's travels. And the work was performed entirely unbeknownst to anyone in Keeling Township save for Broward

himself and his hired workers.

Broward named the castle “Garmlish” after a creature he had stumbled across in his folklore research.

That Broward could have built such a massive structure unknown to anyone and kept it hidden from everyone was inconceivable, but by far the deepest secret of all--and of which Broward himself until recently was only vaguely aware--was that he was dying.

At the first inkling that his time on this Earth was coming to an end, Broward made out his will. To say the document was concise would be a gross understatement. It contained but a single sentence. Having no children and no living relatives to whom to leave any of his assets or divulge any of his secrets, Broward left everything to the one person who had shown him any kindness and any respect: the newspaper delivery boy named Cameron Billings. The will read simply, “I, Ebenezer Broward, being of sound body--well, except for the dying part--and mind, leave all that I have to Cameron Billings of the Keeling Home for Children at 3215 East 18th Circle, Keeling Township, and order that he become ward of the staff at my home at 219 Dambridge Court.” The attorney present at Broward's signing of the document had not the slightest idea of Broward's fortune or the size of the properties he owned in Keeling Township.

They say that no good deed goes unpunished. So it was for poor Cameron Billings, the heir to Broward's fortune and soon-to-be owner of Garmlish Castle, whose secrets were dark and ran deep into the earth.

Chapter II: Cameron Billings

Cameron Billings was one of 27 orphans currently living in the Keeling Home for Children. Each child was required to take a job upon reaching the age of 12. Assignments were low-paying, menial tasks often performed more as community service rather than actual gainful employment. Some children cut grass and ran errands for the elderly, others painted homes and fences, still others would pick up trash off the streets. The money they earned from their work went into savings accounts held for them until they reached adulthood and left the Home to strike out on their own.

Cameron, or Cam, as everyone called him, was given the job of newspaper delivery boy for the neighborhoods surrounding the Home. He'd been doing it now for going on two years and hoped his earnings would one day buy him his own car so that he could drive away from Keeling Township and never look back.

He rode a bicycle that belonged to the Home up and down the streets of Keeling Township's East Park borough, rising in the wee hours of the morning before school to deliver the daily paper to a list of clients compiled by the Home. Almost all of them were senior citizens who still preferred getting their news the old-fashioned way rather than via other media. Some were crotchety old farts who had nary a friendly word for anyone. One old fellow, however, seemed like such a sad and lonely person that Cam had taken a liking to him. He greeted the man cheerfully every day and tried to make small talk. The man had little to say, but Cam could tell by the light in his eyes that their brief, if one-sided, conversations cheered him in some small way. It lifted Cam's own spirits to know that he had done something, however small, to make a difference.

So it was that each day he pedaled down Dambridge Court on the way to house 219 at the end of the cul de sac, he felt energized and even, to some degree, hopeful.

Unlike Cam's other customers, Mr. Broward was always up early waiting on the front porch for his morning delivery. He would sit in an old rocker with peeling paint, creaking back and forth as Cam pedaled up the drive. Cam always hopped off his bike and walked to the porch to say hello and make polite offers to perform other chores Mr. Broward might need done. Mr. Broward always politely refused, and Cam would be on his way to the next name on his list.

Dambridge Court cut off from the long loop formed by East 18th Circle, stretched back to the very borders of Keeling Township, and backed up to a densely wooded area that had never in the township's 150-year history been developed.

It was at the very end of that court where the house at 219 stood, all by itself, surrounded by trees and hedges with a dense forest of towering trees behind it, all tangled with vines, briars, poison oak, poison ivy and thick with ferns.

On the day that Cam's life changed forever, he trudged home from school under the weight of his over-full backpack, kicking rocks and cans along the sidewalk. The ground was wet from the light drizzle that had fallen earlier. Brown and orange leaves lay scattered about like damp shreds of wrinkled cardboard.

He turned left from Lanburne Drive onto East 18th Circle, walked half a block to the four-story, concrete tower at 3215, the name Keeling Home for Children engraved in deep, block letters above an arched entryway. He sighed, mounted the stairs, and stepped into the foyer to find several people waiting inside.

One was a tall, cadaverously thin man in a pressed grey suit; another was the Keeling Township sheriff, Elwood Danby, short, round and bald as an egg in his khaki uniform; the rest were Home staff, including Executive Director Pamela Whorley, whose aristocratic beauty and silky, auburn hair bewitched many would-be suitors.

Director Whorley nodded to the men when Cam entered and approached him just inside

the door.

“Cam,” she said, clasping her hands in front of her as she often did when speaking to people, “there has been news about Mr. Broward.”

Remembering himself, Cam pulled off his faded black baseball cap and stuffed it in his back pocket.

“Oh,” Cam said.

Whorley just looked at him as if she didn't quite know what to say. Thinking she was waiting for him to say something, Cam spoke up.

“I delivered his paper today on time, Ms. Whorley,” he said, “but he wasn't there waiting like he usually is.”

“Cam,” she said, raising a hand. “Mr. Broward passed away today.”

Cam was at a loss. He wasn't sure why the death of an old man would draw so much attention and even less sure why any of that attention would be focused on him. He liked the old guy well enough, but outside of making small talk and trying to help him out now and again, Cam really hardly knew the man.

It was a sad thing, though. Old Mr. Broward dying like that, all alone, no friends, no family. Cam hoped it wouldn't be like that for him. He wanted a big family and lots of friends some day. He looked at the floor and wondered what it had been like for Mr. Broward in that ancient, run-down house all by himself.

When he delivered the paper and offered to do small chores for Mr. Broward, Cam often imagined being invited in for tea. He sometimes fantasized that Mr. Broward was like John Wemmick in Great Expectations, except Broward's house was not a miniature castle with a drawbridge. But maybe inside it was like Wemmick's house and maybe he was more like Wemmick inside than he was out.

He hoped it was like that, anyway. But he'd never been invited in for tea or anything else and never allowed to do the old man any kindness beyond delivering the paper to his front door.

"He was a nice man," Cam said. "At least, he was nice to me. He seemed awfully sad and lonely."

He wasn't sure these were the right things to say, but Ms. Whorley seemed to think he ought to be saying something, so he filled the gaps in the conversation with whatever came to mind.

Ms. Whorley gave him a strained smile.

"Well," she said, "it seems he took something of a liking to you."

Cam gave her a puzzled look. It was obvious there was much she was not saying or did not know how to say. He wished she would just come out and say it.

She smoothed his messy hair with slender, porcelain fingers and then took both of his hands in hers and looked him straight in the eye.

"Cam, if there's anything you need, you be sure to let me know. You're a good boy, and I'm sure you'll be well taken care of. I'm—I just don't know ..."

Her voice trailed off. A tiny tear welled up in the corner of an eye. She sniffed, dropped his hands and turned away.

The thin man extended a long, bony hand. He wore bifocals in thick, black frames. The man's hair, so dark it gleamed with a bluish tint, was meticulously groomed.

"Mr. Billings," he said formally, "I am Charles Trumbull, esquire. I helped Mr. Broward prepare his will and witnessed its signing."

As he spoke, the rotund Sheriff Danby joined him and nodded to Cam with a friendly smile as he wrung the brim of his hat.

Trumbull gazed coldly down at Cam with eyes like dark marbles. He was like all the

monsters in Cam's books and favorite movies. His gauntness made him seem even like Nosferatu.

"I will not mince words, Mr. Billings," he said. "Mr. Broward has left everything he owns to you, that includes his home at 219 Dambridge and whatever monetary wealth he possessed."

Danby barely suppressed a guffaw. Ms. Whorley scowled.

Cam's mouth dropped open and he looked to Ms. Whorley for help. What did all this mean?

"Oh, for pity's sake," Ms. Whorley said.

She grabbed Cam by a hand and pulled him into her office.

"You men sit out there a moment," she commanded, "while I explain everything to Cam."

And then she shut the door hard and winced a bit as the booming of it echoed down the halls and up the stairs.

She motioned Cam to a chair in front of a desk piled high with papers, drawings, clay sculptures and deformed ceramics.

"Please sit down, Cam."

She smoothed out her skirt, sat down on a bench opposite Cam and folded her hands in her lap.

"When Mr. Broward wrote his will," she explained to him, "he named you sole heir to his estate. Do you know what that means?"

Cam nodded. "Well, yeah," he said. "It means he left all his stuff to me. But I don't really understand why."

Ms. Whorley smiled and brushed stray lock of burnished copper behind an ear.

"Oh, Cam, it was most certainly because you were the only one in town who ever showed him any kindness or any respect. He had no family and no friends.

“Unfortunately, because of the way the will is written, Mr. Trumbull says you must take possession of his property. That means you must either move into Mr. Broward's home or sell it to an agent.”

Cam gave her a look of utter disbelief.

“It seems that Mr. Broward meant for you to become a ward to his—to the 'staff' at his home.”

Cam noticed the way she said the word “staff.” And he couldn't help thinking about it himself. What “staff” could this crooked, beggarly old man possibly have? She stared at him with that slight smile she held on her face when she'd asked a question she knew someone had the answer to and was waiting patiently to hear it. He fixed his attention on a lock of her auburn hair that had fallen down over one eyelash and bounced every time she blinked. She continued smiling at him. And he struggled to figure out exactly what it was she wanted from him.

Then it suddenly hit him what Ms. Whorley was hinting at.

He rocked his head back in an expansive nod.

“You think I should sell the place so I don't have to move out of the Home,” Cam said.

Ms. Whorley beamed.

“Exactly!” She patted his leg proudly.

She was worried for him, Cam realized. She didn't trust whoever it was Mr. Broward had intended to take custody of Cam. Or perhaps she was skeptical these people existed at all. Everyone knew Mr. Broward was a poor, old penny-pincher who didn't even own a TV and still used an old-style wringer washer that had to be cranked by hand.

Cam was still puzzled by Mr. Broward's decision to leave everything to him. It made sense in that he may have considered Cam his only friend in town, or the only person deserving of the honor of being named heir. But to leave everything like that to a 14-year-old boy? Very

odd. And to expect him to move into the house to be cared for by the staff? Odder still.

It must have meant something to Mr. Broward to make this gesture, however. It did not seem right that Cam would just brush it aside.

Ms. Whorley seemed to have Cam's best interests in mind, but is that really all it was? Suppose Mr. Broward had a fortune hidden in his home. If Cam sold everything, would he get all of the money himself? Was he even old enough to legally own anything, especially a house?

"Legally," Ms. Whorley said, seeming to anticipate his questions, "I believe the estate would essentially belong to whatever staff lives at the home and would have custody of you until you turned 18."

Cam nodded.

"If I can't legally own it, yet," Cam said, "how can I sell it?"

Ms. Whorley considered this for a moment.

"Well," she began, "I suppose Mr. Trumbull could set up a trust fund for you or the Home could set up an account for you to hold the proceeds from the sale. That would seem to be the simplest solution."

Yes, Cam thought. That certainly made sense.

What was in that house? Broward wanted Cam to have it for a reason. He entrusted it to Cam because he wanted to be sure it was properly taken care of. If he sold it, the house would no doubt be demolished, and that, Cam was sure, was exactly what Broward didn't want to see happen to his home.

"I just believe it would be better for you to remain at the home," Ms. Whorley was saying, "at least until you're old enough to get a real job and take care of yourself and maybe ..."

Cam's mind drifted away from Ms. Whorley and what promised to be a lengthy and no doubt inspiring lecture about responsibility and the loving place he had here at the Home. Until today, Ms. Whorley had hardly said two words to Cam. But she was always kind to him and smiled when she saw him. He had, however, witnessed her lecturing other kids, kids who didn't seem to care much for their after-school jobs or their chores around the Home. Cam was lucky, they said—his job was over with early in the morning before school even started, but they had to slave away after school and then finish their homework, sometimes working late into the night to do it. They were certain Ms. Whorley favored him in some way.

Cam was searching his memory for some clue that Mr. Broward may have left him, something he said or did that was supposed to tip Cam off as to what he ought to do.

There was one day he remembered after hand delivering Mr. Broward's paper he'd offered to do some lawn work. Mr. Broward had smiled thinly at him—the first and only time Cam had seen him smile—and, as always, politely refused. At that point, Cam had looked around and noticed that the lawn was well-groomed and the hedges neatly trimmed. Everyone knew Broward used an old push mower and rusty tools from a bygone age, so how did he manage to keep everything looking so good?

“I don't know how you do it, Mr. Broward,” Cam had remarked, studying the manicured lawn.

Mr. Broward tucked the paper under one arm, opened his creaking front door and said, “A man's got to have his secrets, Mr. Billings.”

"I'm going to keep the house," Cam said, interrupting Ms. Whorley's monologue.

Her mouth fell open, forming an egg-shaped oval glistening with red lipstick.

Before she could protest, Cam continued.

"I'm sure Mr. Broward's staff are very nice people and will take good care of me."

Ms. Whorley just stared at him, dumbfounded.

"Thank you, Ms. Whorley." He rose from the chair and walked to the door. "I appreciate everything you've done for me, but it's time I moved on."

As he closed the door behind him, he thought he could hear her crying.

Chapter III: The Girl Who Wasn't There

If the foyer of Ebenezer Broward's home was any indication, the run-down appearance of its exterior was a façade hiding something far greater across the threshold. A brightly-colored oriental throw decorated the floor just inside the door. The stairway leading to the second level was dark, polished woodwork that shone with a lustrous finish, the grain standing out in bold swirls. The carpeting on the stairs was a deep crimson edged in gold.

An enormous chandelier of copper and crystal hung above a round mahogany table on which sat a copper plate holding a single, white envelope.

Cam stepped across the threshold and glanced back with a wan smile.

Sheriff Danby had driven him to the house, Cam's meager belongings stuffed haphazardly into a military duffel bag left behind at the home by one resident's parent. Danby insisted on meeting the person or persons who would be his new guardians, it being his responsibility as Sheriff to ensure Cam was cared for. Ms. Whorley had started to come along as well but seemed overcome with sadness at the last moment and elected to remain at the Home.

Cam was sort of glad she wasn't there. He didn't want his departure marked with unnecessary drama, and, right now, Ms. Whorley had taken a turn for the decidedly over dramatic.

The polished hardwood floor beneath Cam's feet did not creak or move at all. The wall decorations—including paintings, swords and shields, and knick-knack shelves—the polished woodwork, the lighting, the furniture—everything about the interior told Cam the outside was a ruse. Mr. Broward did have his secrets.

"He—hellooo?" Cam called. His voice echoed up the stairs and down the long hallway that led to another room that seemed miles away. He could tell from what little he could see of it

that the room was bright and well-lit.

He turned back to Sheriff Danby again who waited patiently on the porch.

“They must be off somewhere making preparations,” he told Danby.

Sheriff Danby motioned to the envelope on the table. “Perhaps you should see what’s in the envelope. Maybe they left a message for you.”

“Oh, yeah,” Cam replied with a nod. “Right.”

When he lifted the envelope, he knew immediately it held more than a piece of paper. It was very heavy. His name was written on the envelope in black pen—neat, bold strokes ending with a fine flourish at the end of the M.

Gingerly, he tore it open. It contained a large piece of tarnished metal of intricate design and two sheets of yellowed paper, folded twice. At first he mistook the piece of metal for a brooch or some other decoration, but turning it over in his hand, he recognized it was in fact a key. He unfolded the paper and began to read:

*Cam,
I am glad you chose to leave the Home and come here. By now you’ve come to realize that things aren’t always what they seem. You will also find this true of your new home. No matter how well you think you know the place, you’ll find it will surprise you with yet more secrets. The key you now hold unlocks a treasure trove of secrets. Use it wisely. Take your time getting to know the place, and do not be afraid. You will find friends here. Oh, yes, the place is quite inhabited still. Well, sort of. But you’ll find out all that on your own.*

Now, take this note and put it in your pocket. Hand the second page to Sheriff Danby, who is, no doubt, standing on the stoop waiting to hear about who it is that will be looking after you from now on. Afterwards, be sure to head down the hallway to the kitchen and have yourself a decent meal. The pantry is well stocked.

E. Broward

Cam unfolded the second note.

Dear Cam and Sheriff Danby,

So sorry we could not meet you here, but we had to run out and fetch some provisions for

young Master Billings. Make yourself at home, Cam, and help yourself to anything in the kitchen.

Sheriff Danby, if it's not too much trouble, please stop by on Sunday to pick up Master Billings for Mr. Broward's funeral. The arrangements have all been taken care of.

Should you want to check up on Master Billings, please stop by any time as long as it's not too late.

Yours Truly,

Mr. Garmlish and staff

Mr. Garmlish? Cam had never before heard of any Mr. Garmlish.

He wrapped the first sheet around the key and shoved it into his pocket. The other he handed to Sheriff Danby.

"You were right. They left a note."

As Sheriff Danby read the note, his brow furrowed with skepticism.

"Highly unusual," he mumbled.

He gave a slight shrug, folded the paper, and tucked it into a breast pocket.

"Okay, Cam, I'm off," he said. "If you need anything, you just give me a call, okay?"

"Sure thing, Sheriff."

With a smile and a nod, he patted his hat down on his head and walked back to his cruiser.

Cam slowly closed the door, a feeling of dread creeping up his spine.

He walked down the long hall to the bright room at the end. It was the kitchen.

Everything was neat and spotlessly clean. Mr. Broward had been nothing if not fastidious. Cam began opening cupboard doors to see what he could find. There were neatly stacked cans of vegetables and soups, boxes of instant rice, instant mashed potatoes, crackers, even microwavable macaroni and cheese. Either Mr. Broward ate like a kid or he was expecting one

to move in.

Or maybe, thought Cam, one had already lived here once. But no, most of these packages had been recently purchased. He would have known if Mr. Broward had a child, wouldn't he?

A man's got to have his secrets, Mr. Billings.

He sat down at the kitchen table and ate some crackers. Suddenly, he felt more alone than he'd ever felt before. There was no staff, never had been. Mr. Broward had meant for him to live here alone, to become the new Mr. Broward, the lonely man nobody really knew. Cam was free, utterly free, to do as he pleased, and with that knowledge an indescribable dread rose up inside him. His eyes began to burn with welling tears.

And that's when he noticed the girl sitting at the table across from him.

He dropped the crackers with a gasp and sat bolt upright.

"Are you the new man?" she asked matter of factly.

"Who?" Cam found himself unable to speak in complete sentences.

The girl tilted her head questioningly much like a befuddled dog. Her hair was stringy and brown. She wore a frilly dress with puffy sleeves that Cam knew must have gone out of style a hundred years ago. It was actually closer to two hundred. From the look of her, she was about six years old, a pudgy little thing with short, thick fingers and a round face dotted with freckles on the humps of her cheeks.

"Are you asking me who I am?" the girl said. "It is I who should be asking you questions. You are, after all, the stranger here, sitting in my home, eating my crackers."

"Sorry," Cam mumbled and pushed the open package of crackers across the table. "Mr. Broward is dead. He left the place to me in his will."

"I know," the girl replied. She stared at the crackers but did not reach for them.

Cam waited patiently, his hands in his lap. The house was silent as a grave save for the click-clack of a grandfather clock in another room. He watched the girl; she the crackers.

"I could fix some soup," Cam offered. "Would you like that?"

The girl seemed to have noticed him again. She met his gaze with her too-blue eyes, which seemed large for her face. She was like an anime character. The corners of her tiny mouth drooped downward, and a single tear ran slowly down the curve of her cheek.

"I can't eat," she said. "I'm not really here at all."

Cam wasn't sure how to respond to that.

"But you're sitting right there," was all he could manage.

She frowned as if wondering how to explain it to him.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"I am--or was--Betina," she replied. "I died a long, long time ago. What you see is a just a ghost, or something like a ghost. I'm trapped here. He did it. He brought me here. He brought us all here."

"He? You mean Mr. Broward?"

"He sometimes went by that name, but it seems he had many names. We all knew him as someone different. He told me to call him Eb, short for Ebenezer."

Cam leaned forward, regarding her closely. He reached out to touch her sleeve. It felt like real fabric to him.

"It's kind of like an illusion," she said, watching as his fingers felt the ruffle on her sleeve. "Your mind fills in the gaps where the truth ends. You see a little girl sitting here in a dress, so you feel the sleeve of a dress. If I hit you, it will hurt, but it will leave no mark because it never really happened. I could just as easily have manifested--that's what Eb called it--as a voice in

your head, but he said you would be comforted if I appeared to you as I was in life.”

Cam’s head began to reel. “Is that why you’re here--to comfort me?”

Betina shrugged. “I suppose. And to help you learn about this place.”

“You said ‘we’ earlier. What did you mean? Are there other ghosts here?”

Betina shook her head.

“Oh, no,” she said. “I’m the only ghost. The others are something else entirely. I’m the only one here in the house. The rest are over in the castle.”

“Castle? What castle?”

“Why, Castle Garmlish, of course. You have the key, haven’t you?”

Cam fished the key from his pocket and unwrapped it.

“Yes, that’s it,” said Betina. “Come. You need to see it. And the others. They’re the reason you’re here. You must see to it that they never get out. Eb said it would be doom should they ever escape.”

Chapter IV: Castle Garmlish

The basement door was in the kitchen. Well, actually, the back door from the kitchen opened into a small coatroom, and the basement door was one of three doors inside the coatroom. One of the doors opened to the back porch, the other the kitchen, and the third was the door to the basement. A steep staircase on the other side of the door disappeared into the darkness below.

A panel with multiple switches was mounted on the wall at the top of the stairs. It was an old-style panel with two buttons for each circuit—one to turn something on, like a light for example, and the other to turn it off. All of the off buttons were pressed in.

Cam punched the top button nearest the door, and a column of fluorescent bulbs mounted on the ceiling and running the length of the stairway flickered and buzzed to life. The stairs ended at a wall lined with shelves, the room at the bottom extending to the right.

He descended slowly, taking one step at a time and trying to peek around the corner into the room beyond.

The room was small and L-shaped. The leg of the L was where the furnace and hot water heater were located. At the bottom of the L and all along the outside wall of the top part of the L, it was nothing but shelves lined with plastic containers. Below the shelves were workbenches. Hooks on the walls and below the bottoms of the shelves also held many tools, most of which appeared to be antiques, wooden handled screwdrivers, drills with cranks on them, rusty-toothed pliers. Cam wondered if Mr. Broward ever actually used them.

He examined each wall but found no door the unusual key might unlock. In fact, it seemed to be nothing more than a work room. Like every other part of the house Cam had thus far seen, the work room in the basement was immaculate. The concrete floor was clean and smooth. The work benches were free of clutter and had been recently dusted. Nothing seemed out of place.

And Betina, the little girl who wasn't really there, had disappeared soon after telling Cam that he could find the way to the castle in the basement. It looked like he was on his own to solve this puzzle.

Secrets.

There must be a hidden door somewhere. That had to be it. He needed to find something that stood out or seemed out of place. That would be the clue to where the hidden door was located. "Oh, who am I kidding?" Cam said aloud. "This isn't a Scooby Doo cartoon."

The logical place for the door was at the foot of the L. But all he could see there was a wall of old tools. He reached up to grab an wooden-handled drill with a crank and found that it wouldn't budge. He tried a screwdriver and then a hammer and a chisel. All of the tools on the wall were

not just hanging there, they were mounted solidly in place. And smack dab in the middle of all of them was a trowel with a large, dark wooden handle.

He grasped it and gave a hard pull.

The wall of tools, workbench and all swung toward him. He pulled it open as far as it would go, revealing a huge metal door covered with intricate patterns that seemed to form a kind of tableau. In the dim light he couldn't quite make out what it was.

In the center of the door was what appeared to be a complex series of gears and sprockets and levers.

He traced his fingers over the gearworks and the picture tableau, searching for an opening to fit the key. He needed more light.

Cam looked about in the small room for another panel of switches or a lamp or something. Next to the water heater at the end of the room, he found another panel of switches. Having no idea which switches were for lights, he started to press them all.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Cam whirled about to find Betina standing behind him.

"Don't *do* that!" Cam fought to catch his breath.

"Sorry, but you needed to know." Betina shrugged.

"What do all these switches do?"

She shrugged again. "I don't know. I just know that some of them work the big door and others work the doors on the other side of the big door."

Cam scowled at her for a long moment. "Do any of these switches turn on lights in this room? Are there lights in this room?"

"Top of the stairs," she replied with a shake of her head. "It's the one next to the switch that turns on the lights in the stairway."

Cam shook his head. He should've known.

Halfway up the stairs, he pointed a finger at Betina over the railing. "Stay right there and don't scare me again."

"If you say so," she replied.

Cam trudged up the stairs, jabbed the other switch and walked back down.

A single light just above the door brightly illuminated the room. Betina was standing right where she had been. Cam pointed at his eyes with two fingers and back at Betina.

"I'm watching you," he said.

Betina tilted her head. "I'm watching you watching me."

Cam thought for a moment.

"Now that I know that you're not really there. If I touch you, will I feel anything?"

"You'll feel yourself touching someone who isn't really there."

Cam scowled, shook his head and returned his attention to the door.

With the bright light now shining directly on the metalwork, he could see that it was in fact a tableau depicting what at first glance appeared to be a Halloween scene. People in masks and elaborate costumes stood around what looked like a fire in the middle of a forest. It didn't really make sense to him.

He searched for the keyhole, but the secret of the door continued to elude him.

Cam turned to Betina, who was still standing in the exact same spot.

"You don't have to stand there any more," he told her.

"I didn't want to frighten you," she replied.

"I could use some help figuring this out," he said.

She walked over and stood next to him, gazing up at the odd door and tilting her head in that odd way of hers.

Cam noticed one of the trees seemed oddly off balance. It was missing a limb.

"I think it's the tree," Betina said as the idea began to form in his mind.

He looked at her askance.

“Can you read minds?” he asked.

Betina shook her head.

Cam looked at the key and back at the odd tree. Yes, it made sense. The key is actually the missing limb of the tree. When he looked closer, he saw that there was in fact a slot beneath the tree on the side with the missing limb.

He slid the end of the key into it and saw that it formed a perfect branch. But it was more than that because he could feel that when it clicked into place it was part of a mechanism hidden beneath the tree. The branch was a lever.

He pushed down on the end of the key as if the tree limb were broken. It clicked again at the bottom, and he could hear gears grating together and a ratcheting sound deep inside the door.

Cam jumped back hastily.

A deep sound like metal being dragged over concrete trembled through the walls and floor, and the door slowly slid open to reveal a yawning mouth of darkness.

“That’s the way to Castle Garmlish,” Betina announced with a smile that Cam found unnerving.

Chapter V: Dubious tenants

Cam winced with each step on the stone-tiled floor, as the sound echoed deafeningly loudly in the dark corridor. The light switch just inside the door had done nothing. Betina told him she thought Mr. Broward had been working to fix an issue with the power to the castle when he'd suddenly died.

He thought about calling Keeling Light and Power, but that would raise too many questions and draw too much attention to his situation.

So he was left to fumble around in the darkness with an old flashlight he'd found in the workroom. He just hoped the battery would hold up. The last thing he wanted was to be left in complete darkness in this creepy place.

In truth, what he could see of the corridor with the flashlight didn't seem that creepy, really. Mr. Broward was obviously OCD, so everything was neat and clean.

It was definitely a castle, complete with stone walls, tapestries, sconces, and high, arched ceilings that went up so high the flashlight could not reach them. The floor was polished flagstones that shone like mirrors in the flashlight beam.

The corridor seemed to go on forever. All Cam could see in the beam of light ahead was murky darkness and more tapestries. The wall sconces held faux torches that were obviously actually electric lights. If the issue with the power hadn't occurred or if Mr. Broward had been able to fix it, the hallway would actually be pretty cool with the fake torchlight lighting up all of the tapestries.

Betina had vanished again just as he'd stepped over the threshold, flashlight in hand. He suspected she was afraid of this place. So far Mr. Broward's secrets had been pretty harmless, but Cam was afraid that could change quickly. If it did, he hoped it would at least be in a well-lighted room.

He inched along, studying the tapestries. Most just held fancy designs, but some showed medieval hunting scenes or huge battles, but none of the figures depicted in them were human. There were centaurs, bat-winged demons, fairies, elves, werewolves, vampires and fishlike creatures.

Mr. Broward's secrets were becoming stranger.

At the end of the long hallway, Cam arrived at a very ordinary looking wooden door. He tried the doorknob. It was unlocked. The door swung inward--it was much heavier than it looked--opening on an octagonal room about 25 feet across with a vaulted ceiling.

Cam gasped.

In the center of the room was a large metal framework in the shape of a huge asterisk, and strapped to it was a woman with long dark hair. Her skin was pale as moonlight, and she wore a long, purple dress. Metal straps held her at the waist and neck, and her feet and hands were encased in shiny metal that looked like chrome. A tangle of wires and tubes led from the frame to panels in the floor and ceiling. In the corner were a large flatscreen monitor and a computer.

Cam stood dumbfounded for a long moment, wishing Betina were there to help him understand what it meant. Mr. Broward now appeared to be a modern-day Dr. Frankenstein, complete with his own monster, only this one was far prettier than the movie monster or the movie monster's bride.

A sudden impulse struck him to turn around and run away. To get out of the house and run back to the Keeling Home for Children. To call Sheriff Danby and Mr. Whorley and tell them he didn't want to be here.

Yes, yes. That's what he needed to do.

He moved a foot back toward the door and was ready to bolt when the woman's eyes opened.

"Please come in," she said. "I was just resting my eyes."

Cam's mouth opened and shut. He wanted to cry out and run but felt compelled to obey. Her voice was clear and high and innocent, like the voice of a young girl. His feet began to move as if of their own volition. Deeper into the room they carried him, closer to the woman.

He met her gaze. Her almond-shaped eyes were cobalt blue and seemed to glow with an inner light. Against her porcelain skin they were like shards of glacier ice. Her voice had summoned him, but it was her eyes that seemed to pull him irresistibly forward.

Before he realized it, Cam was standing at the foot of the asterisk looking up at her.

"What is your name, child?" she asked.

"Cam. Cameron Billings."

"Are you here because the master of the castle is gone?"

Cam swallowed.

"Yes, Mr. Broward passed away. He--"

The room echoed with her laughter, like a thousand thrushes calling at once.

"Is that what he calls himself out there?" She remarked.

"Ebenezer Broward," Cam replied. "That's his name."

The woman shook her head, raven hair dancing like strands of spider silk..

"There is little truth to the tale of his origins. As I'm sure you've no doubt discovered, he is a man of many secrets, as was his father ... as you will be."

Cam was once again seized with the urge to turn and run away, run far away, to forget everything.

"Come," the woman said. "Drag that crate over here and stand on it so I can look at you more closely."

Cam began to pull the wooden crate from its place beneath a shelf jutting from the wall. It was heavy and stamped with letters in a foreign language. As he wrestled it to the odd crucifix, he happened to glance up and saw Betina standing in the doorway. When he met her gaze, she slowly shook her head from side to side.

He climbed up on the crate and was now face to face with the woman. He glanced back to the doorway and found Betina glaring. She seemed fearful. She was yelling at him with her eyes, telling him, he knew, to get away from this woman. But he could not.

"That's better," she said.

"Are you--are you a vampire?" Cam asked.

She laughed that magical laugh again.

"Don't be silly," she replied, "the vampires are in the northwest wing."

"How did you get here?" he asked.

"Your Mr. Broward captured me, of course."

"Then you're a prisoner here. I should free you. How do I undo these restraints?"

He began fiddling with the metal casing around her hands and tested the straps at her neck and waist.

The woman scowled at him.

“Don’t be foolish, Cameron Billings. My power is the only thing keeping the rest of them in check. If I must remain here a thousand lifetimes to prevent the devastation that would occur should they escape, then so be it. There are worse fates to suffer.”

Questions eddied in Cam’s mind. His rational mind was now telling him that, yes, it would be good to get away from this place, to turn away and pretend none of this had happened.

“What is your name?” he asked her instead.

“Agate.”

Cam sat down on the crate and looked at the floor.

“Agate, what is this place. What’s it all about and why did he want me to be here?”

Agate let out a long sigh. What followed was a long period of silence during which Cam listened to the hum of energy flowing through the cables attached to Agate’s prison. He thought he could also hear the thrumming of machinery deep below the ground.

Cam looked back to the doorway. Betina was gone yet again. Perhaps she sensed a danger here that he could not. Why was he still here when everything inside had been telling him to run away?

“There is no logical explanation.” Agate’s voice rang, scattering the silence like shadows.

“Broward was a collector. He collected monsters. He collected ghosts. He traveled the world over as his father had to places where the dead are restless where the veil between this world and the others is thin. He harvested all manner of creatures and spirits. And he collected me to keep all of the ghosts and monsters in check. This is a prison, Cameron Billings, and I am the guard. You, you are the new warden.”

Chapter VI: Cellblocks

Just as he'd know it would, the bench in the fake workroom had a hidden panel that opened a secret alcove on the wall. He didn't have to listen long to Agate's speech to realize he needed more information--not from Betina or Agate or any of the other dubious tenants who resided in the castle or the house or wherever, but from a factual source.

He needed to see floorplans for Castle Garmlish and for the house itself. He knew they must exist. Broward could not have built his secrets without having intimate knowledge of the construction of both buildings.

That, of course, begged many questions. Every question led to more questions. Broward may have paid for and ordered the construction of the castle, but who did the actual work? And how could Broward have possibly carried out such a huge construction project here in Keeling Township without anybody knowing that something was going on?

Cam fished around in the hidden alcove and found several plastic cylinders and a large, leather bound volume. He scattered them across the workbench. The first cylinder he opened looked like wiring schematics drawn on thin tracing paper. He recognized some symbols for circuits and resistance from his science class. Another cylinder contained the floorplans for the house. When he placed the wiring schematics over the floorplan, he could see that it showed how the house was wired.

It must have been important for Broward to know which switches controlled which circuits throughout the house. Betina had said that some of the switches at the top of the basement stairs controlled doors in the castle. That didn't really make a lot of sense to Cam. The castle seemed to have its own systems. Why would Broward want to open doors in the castle from inside the house?

In the third cylinder he opened Cam found the annotated floorplans to Castle Garmlish. Notes in Broward's own handwriting labeled different parts of the castle. The castle was octagonal with rectangular wings jutting from each side of the octagon. There were multiple levels to each wing, and at the end of each wing was an odd marking Cam didn't understand. It seemed to represent a kind of door, but it wasn't like the other door symbols on the plans.

"You shouldn't talk to that woman"

Cam jumped, crumpling the plans he was studying.

"I told you not to do that any more, Betina!"

"Sorry," she replied in her reserved manner. "But you really shouldn't talk to that woman. She's bad."

Cam replied with an exasperated sigh. "Well, I somehow managed to talk to her and survive."

"You don't know how dangerous she is. She has powers." Betina then abruptly changed the subject. "What are you doing?"

Holding a finger to mark a specific location in the plans, Cam turned and met her gaze.

"I'm studying the layout of the house and castle to make sense of this madness," he replied. "Agate told me Broward captured you and whatever other things are in the castle. So you're like his prisoner or something. Is that right?"

"Sort of."

Cam opened his mouth to respond but thought better of it and returned his attention to the floor plans. As he read Broward's handwritten notations, the thought suddenly struck him that none of this was real, that the whole thing was some kind of hoax or a prank or something. He laughed. Yes, that's what it was. This was just some kind of giant funhouse. It was a Halloween haunted house. What Broward wanted him to do was turn this into some kind of amusement attraction. The rooms were probably all rigged for sound and lights and other effects to scare visitors.

"What are you laughing about?" Betina asked.

Cam smiled at her.

"Oh, you're good," he told her. "You play your part very well."

Betina shrugged.

"I'm just me."

"Right."

Cam rolled up the plans and marched to the secret door. He needed no help opening it this time.

Betina followed him to the threshold.

"Where are you going, Cam? What are you doing?"

Cam realized it was the first time she called him by name. It affirmed for him that he was doing the right thing. He'd finally gone off script and whatever game Broward had set up for him hadn't accounted for his being proactive about anything.

"I'm the warden," he told Betina. "I'm going to visit the inmates."

Betina regarded him with the expression one gives a small child who doesn't understand something.

"As you wish. But be careful."

"Right. While I'm gone why don't you see what you can do about fixing these lights."

Cam stalked down the long hallway to Agate's room. According to the plans there should be two doors leading from that room to a narrow corridor connected to all of the castle's wings. He didn't know what all of the symbols on the floor plans meant, but the door symbols in the corridor were different from those representing regular doors like the one to Agate's room.

He wondered if he would be able to surprise her with his sudden visit and catch her out of character. Probably not. Betina had likely already warned her by intercom or something. He wished he knew how to read all of the plans and schematics. He'd know for sure then what kind of communications system was installed.

Cam arrived at the room that served as Agate's cell. He put his ear to the door and listened for a moment before popping the door open and stepping quickly inside.

Agate was still bound. The room was as it had been left.

She regarded him impassively with her cobalt eyes as if she were not at all surprised to see him.

The doors on either side of the room were as the plans indicated. He hadn't noticed the doors before because they were integrated into the walls themselves. They just looked like wall panels, but you could see the seams. The door "handles" consisted of large round buttons in the middle of each door that at first glance appeared to be ornamentation.

Cam checked the notes on the floor plans and decided to go to the West door, which led to the "werewolf" block.

"Cameron?" Agate called to him. And then when he didn't respond: "Cam, please."

Cam pressed the button, and the door popped inward and slid with a slight grating sound to the right. On the other side of the door was a small square room with a double sliding door on the other side. Ignoring Agate, he stepped inside, and the door closed behind him. A panel of six unlabeled buttons was set in a metal panel to the left of the sliding doors on the other side. The top button on the far left was the only one with any kind of markings, a small diamond shape. He pressed it, and the sliding doors opened on yet another dark and deserted corridor. He stepped

over the threshold, the sliding doors clunking closed behind him.

Chapter VII: Cellblock W

It became immediately apparent to Cam that this corridor saw far less activity than the other parts of the castle he'd seen. It was not immaculately clean. A thin layer of dust covered the floor along with bits of concrete and pebbles shaken loose from the walls and ceiling. Cobwebs clung to wall sconces, the only decoration in the corridor. If he planned to turn this into a Halloween attraction, he'd have to work on the decor. Some creepy wall hangings would be good. He should also paint the walls black.

His trusty flashlight was showing signs of fatigue. The once bright white light had faded to a yellow orange. He'd have to find some batteries soon.

At the end of the hallway, metal bars blocked the way. On other side the darkness seemed thicker and darker than in the hallway. He pointed the flashlight between the bars but could see nothing. The light had become a dull orange. He would soon be left in the dark, he knew, but it was impossible to get lost in this place of straight corridors with no doors.

A faint sound issued from the darkness on the other side of the bars, like fingers tapping on a countertop. He smacked the flashlight against his palm, trying to revive it. The light shown a bit brightly for a brief moment, but he still couldn't see anything.

Another sound reached his ears. It sounded like deep breathing. His hand began to tremble as he pointed the flashlight at different points on the other side of the bars, trying to see something, anything. The beam didn't reach more than about ten feet, so all he could see was gray stone walls and a dirt and stone floor. All he knew was that the other side of the bars was not of the same construction as the concrete and stone of the corridor or the rest of the castle. It was rough hewn, almost like a natural cave with some man-made construction.

Cam pressed his face to the bars, squinting into the blackness. A yellow-fanged snout suddenly thrust itself with a snarl into the dull glow of the flashlight. Cam jerked back, but it was too late. Powerful claws pulled his arm through, pinning him against the bars. The flashlight fell to the floor, and he was swallowed in darkness. He could feel hot, damp breath on his face as a second set of claws raked across his chest, shredding his shirt and opening four long gashes. Warm blood ran down his body.

He wriggled and began punching at the arm that held him against the bars. His frantic blows landed mostly on the bars, and he was sure one of his fingers broke. One wild swing went between the bars and slammed into something soft and wet. The grip of the claws on his arm loosened just enough for him to struggle free. He realized he punched whatever it was right in the snout.

He kicked away from the bars, landing on his back on the dusty floor. It was pitch black, so he could see nothing, but he could hear the puffing breaths and the low, throaty growls.

Cam was dumbfounded. He had been attacked by a werewolf. The blood that soaked his shirt was enough evidence that this was not a prank, not a haunted house stunt for tourists and teenaged joy seekers.

I've inherited a prison for monsters, Cam thought. That's what this is: a prison for monsters.

Old Mr. Broward was a collector of monsters, and they were all right here in a secret castle prison in the middle of Keeling Township.

Cam crab-walked against the wall, shimmied up. As he leaned in shock against the cold stone, he found he could hear rapid exhalations like a bellows driven by a piston engine. He realized it was his own breathing. He was hyperventilating. Need to stop the bleeding. Like an automaton, he clumsily tugged at the sleeves of his windbreaker. His fingers didn't seem to work right. After peeling it off, he wrapped it around his midsection where the deep cuts were oozing blood.

He felt like crying. Instead, he stumbled back down the passage toward the door to Agate's room. If she was the power that held all of these things in check, why were lights out? Why were things failing?

Without his flashlight, he had to feel his way along the wall. Occasionally, he would bump his head on a wall sconce and then smack it once or twice hoping to coax it to life.

Eventually, he reached the end of the hall and began groping for the door. His heartbeat quickened when he found nothing. No panel, no latch, no button. Nothing.

There was nothing there but cold, rough concrete. He was trapped in pitch dark in a prison block full of werewolves.

"Heeeelllp!" Cam began hammering on the blank wall with his fists, bloodying the heels of each hand.

He yelled and pounded until his cries were nothing more than squeaky croaks that he could barely hear himself. Tears streaming down his face, he slumped to the floor and curled up in a tight ball.

Where was Betina now? Could Agate not hear him? Couldn't she control the doors and everything? He suddenly felt he couldn't trust anything in this crazy place. Everything seemed so organized and controlled on the surface. Underneath, behind the curtain, it was chaos.

What could he do? His cries for help had gone unanswered, unheard. There had to be another way out of here, another door somewhere. A secret panel and a secret passage back to the house.

Cam wiped away tears and snot and once again pulled himself up. He began to feel along each wall on either side of the one where the door should have been. Methodically, he went several feet along one wall searching high and low and then went back along the other wall. The most likely place for a door would be on the “inner” wall toward the center of the building, he decided. He did most of his searching there.

But he found nothing. Aside from the wall sconces, there was nothing in the hallway except for stone walls and floors. If the ceiling held any secrets, he would never know. For all he knew, there was a secret catwalk above, accessible via a rope or chain ladder.

It was hopeless, he realized. The gashes in his abdomen began to throb. He could feel the dampness in the windbreaker he’d used to bind the wounds, but it didn’t seem like they were bleeding any more. They might only be scratches, but the pain made them feel like mortal injuries.

He continued working his way along the walls until he approached the bars that marked the beginning of the cellblock.

A terrifying thought suddenly struck Cam: The only way out lay on the other side of those bars. The way he saw it, he had two choices: He could go back to where the door should be and wait, hoping that eventually the door would somehow magically reappear, or he could find some way to get on the other side of the barred gate that separated him from the werewolves.

It would be daylight at some point, right? And then he would be relatively safe, even if he couldn’t see. Getting the flashlight back would help a lot. It had to be somewhere near the bars where he was attacked. It might be on this side somewhere, and if it were on the other, it couldn’t be more than a couple of feet away. He might be able to reach it.

Cam’s legs became wobbly. His head began to swim. He didn’t think he’d lost that much blood from the wound. It could be a combination of factors, not the least of which was his being enveloped in complete darkness after having been attacked by a monster.

He leaned against the wall for support as he dragged himself forward, each step an exhausting ordeal. Stars swam before his eyes. He gasped for breath.

Weird, he thought. What’s happening to me. Maybe I’m turning into a werewolf.

He shook his head like a dog exiting the bathtub.

Suddenly, he found himself pressed against cold iron. He’d reached cellblock gate. Though he was fearful of another attack, Cam didn’t have the strength to push himself away. He slid slowly to the floor, one cheek pressed against the bars. He groped feebly through and along the gate, searching for the flashlight. He dragged himself along the iron teeth to the opposite wall. The

flashlight was nowhere within his reach.

Like a limp doll he sat against the wall of his cage, resting, gathering his strength. Then he gripped the bars in both hands and pulled himself to a standing position. Feeling along the wall, he found a lever. Without a second thought, he leaned his weight on it and it shifted.

A clang shattered the silence, followed by the ratcheting of a chain and the scraping of iron against concrete.

Cam reached forward into the darkness and fell headlong into darkness. He was dimly aware of the concrete floor slamming into his ribs and face, and then everything was all stars in the night sky.

His pain was gone and fireflies danced around him. Diamonds sparkled in the sky; a small fire crackled nearby. Moonlight rippled on the surface of a black oil mirror.

Cam was dreaming, he realized, and he didn't really want to wake up right now. The air was neither cool nor warm. Crickets played violins as dark waves lapped at the pebbled shore. He had never felt so relaxed. He could feel the breeze between his toes and realized he was barefoot. The fire was warm. He rolled onto his side and curled into a fetal position with his back to the flame, letting it warm him from neck to feet.

The heat of the fire became a hot, damp breeze on his neck. It was a breath exhaled into his ear. Something cold and wet touched his neck and sniffed.

He tried to sit up, but pain lanced through his abdomen, doubling him into fetal position. It was still dark, but the stars were gone, along with the campfire and the pond.

The cold thing that touched the back of his neck, he knew, was the snout of an animal. And, given his current location, it could only be one of the werewolves.

The furred snout pressed itself close to his ear.

"Who are you?" The gravelly voice startled Cam so much that he cried out. "Why are you here?" The second question was punctuated with a snarl.

Gingerly, Cam rolled onto his back to face the unseen interrogator.

Another voice issued from nearby, less harsh than the first, but just as rough: "Light the torch so he can see us."

The flashlight sprang to life nearby illuminated a small sphere around Cam. A dozen sets of eyes glowed silvery orange around him.

The second voice spoke again. "Answer the question. Who are you?"

"I'm Cam Billings." He said no more.

The werewolf with the gravelly voice pushed its snout near Cam's face, huffing hot breath on his cheek. Topaz eyes gleamed at him. Gravel Voice's snout and face were a coal-black mask, the eyes glowing embers amid the dark felt.

"Where's the old man?"

"You mean, Broward? He's dead. He left this place to me in his will."

Gasps and whimpers echoed all around him. Snarls and growls rumbled among the throngs surrounding him. He realized from the voices that there were more present than the sets of eyes that reflected the flashlight.

"It cannot be." The second one moved closer now as well.

He padded forward on all fours and sat on his haunches next to Cam. He was grey faced with a shock of black mane and a snow-white stripe that speared from the mane to the center of his snout, just touching the shiny black cap of his nostrils,.

"Where is his body?"

Cam stared blankly at him for a brief moment.

"His ... body?"

The snout dipped and rose.

"Yes, his body."

"Well, I'm ... not really sure. The funeral home, I guess. I think he will be buried in the cemetery up on the hill past the church."

White Stripe and Gravel Voice turned away for a private conversation that consisted of growls and rumblings that Cam could not make out. Others emerged from the shadows and crowded around them. There were snarls and bared fangs. Cam gathered they were debating something relating to Broward.

One voice some distance away howled with dismay, "Our plan is ruined!"

Cam inched back against a wall and tried to lever himself to a standing position. Pain shot

through him like a jolt of electricity, turning his muscles to melting wax. Powerful arms caught him under his arms, pulled him up and held him.

The fur was soft, dark grey and peppered with frost. Cam nodded thanks. The werewolf's face was the same frosty grey. The eyes were emeralds and seemed to regard him sympathetically.

White Stripe and Gravel Voice approached him, walking upright. They seemed to be the leaders of the group.

"Cameron Billings," White Stripe said, "we need your help. But first, you must know the truth about this place."

Chapter VIII: Revelations

Cam was ushered to a small room furnished simply with a low, round table, a sink, a few wooden chairs and a bed. It was a prison cell, he realized. The place was indeed laid out and designed just like a prison. A kerosene lantern provided modest but warm light, more than adequate for the small cell.

Before the prison cell meeting, however, the wolf that had helped Cam earlier had taken him to their infirmary and cleaned and bandaged his wounds. It--rather--she was the resident nurse and presided over the first aid and medical supplies stocked in the infirmary. She shifted to human form and donned a white lab coat. Her hair was frosty white, her complexion pale. Her eyes were bright and inhumanly green.

She administered a topical analgesic before swabbing his wounds with iodine and stitching him up.

Cam was sure to look away from the work she was performing. He didn't want to see the damage the werewolf claws had done. To take his mind off of it, he tried striking up a conversation.

"What's your name?"

The green eyes regarded him warily.

"They call me Mist," she answered.

"How did you come by that? Does it mean anything?"

"Our names usually reflect something about our personality, our appearance or our demeanor. Mine comes from the color of my fur and for my reputation of being able to sneak silently and undetected among our foes."

Cam considered this for a moment before prodding further. "So, you're a warrior, then. Who are you fighting?"

Mist stop her ministrations and stared into his eyes. Though her face was impassive, the look nonetheless unnerved Cam. He was afraid he'd offended or insulted her in some way.

"I-I'm sorry."

She shook her head, the fluff of snow dancing. "You've done nothing wrong. We have always been at war in our world with those who would push us from land that is rightfully ours. And now we are imprisoned between worlds, neither here nor there, fighting a battle for which we are ill equipped."

Mist finished bandaging him and gave him a clean shirt to wear. It was a little big and hung down nearly to his knees, but it was better than going shirtless in the cold dungeon. He rolled the cuffs up to his wrists.

"What do you mean," Cam asked, "that you're ill equipped for this battle?"

Her smile was humorless, a kind of challenge.

"We are wolves," she replied. "We are built for hunting, pursuit, combat. The battle we now face is one that requires knowledge and cunning and powers we do not possess.

"Enough questions now. Snowpath and Rageclaw have much to discuss with you."

Cam sat in one of the chairs and waited for the others to arrive.

A few minutes passed, and the two leaders, Snowpath and Rageclaw entered. They had also assumed human form. The one known as Snowpath was a small man of slight build. He appeared to be in his sixties. His hair was greying with a shock of white that ran from the point of his widow's peak down the back of his neck to his shoulders. He wore a hooded rosewood cloak over a simple shirt and jeans.

The other was a tall, muscular brute with the physique of a bodybuilder, his skin ebon stretched taut over sinewy arms. He, too, wore jeans with a sleeveless flannel shirt, unbuttoned down to the sternum.

Snowpath sat in the chair next to Cam. Rageclaw stood next to Snowpath and folded tree trunk arms over broad, bulging pecs.

"It remains a mystery to me," Snowpath began, "as to why you would be named steward in this place and servant to the witch. Make no mistake, Mr. Billings, it is the witch who holds this place, and you, like Broward, are merely her pawn."

Cam shifted nervously. "I spoke to her," he croaked, his voice cracking.

Snowpath leaned close to Cam, camel-colored skin lined with tiny cracks. "You must not listen to her. Her mouth is full of lies, her voice a mesmer's dance. She will confound and hypnotize you with her words. There is one thing you can trust about Castle Garmlish, Young Cam--nothing is as it seems. If you know a man to be your enemy, he is most certainly your friend, for it is the Witch's will that we perceive everything to be the opposite of what it truly is."

Cam's hand strayed to his throbbing chest.

Rageclaw saw the motion and hung his head. "That ... was a mistake."

The old wolf clasped Cam's hands. "This place is a prison that holds beings from multiple worlds created from the imaginations of many different peoples. It draws upon the superstitions, fears, folklore and legends of many cultures and creates its own realities based on those ideas. This place is the prison where the creatures of those fancies are locked away, desiring only to escape."

Cam shook his head. "But why? For what reason?"

Rageclaw answered in his gruff fashion, "Simple--conquest. The Witch is not happy to have created worlds out of nothing, she desires to rule yours. We are her soldiers."

Snowpath nodded. "Would-be soldiers. She did not count on her creations having wills of her own. The spirit of the wolf cannot be cowed any more than fury of the vampires or the obduracy of the spiders."

"Spiders?"

"Spiders are very willful creatures, Cam; they are slaves to no one."

Cam pulled his hands back, stood and began pacing about the cell. The meager light from lanterns cast deformed shadows across the floor and up the walls.

"What do you need me for?"

Snowpath placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Broward is the key," he said. "We need his body. You must bring it here."

The dismay on Cam's face must have been obvious.

"Wh-whaat?!"

Rageclaw grunted and gave a curt nod. "It must be you. You are the only one who can

do it.”

Cam’s mouth fell open. His jawed moved up and down, but he could not force out any words.

They were crazy. It was impossible. He was trapped inside an insane nightmare and could not wake up. The impossibility of it all was proof that none of it was real. He should just lie down and hope to wake up soon. It was all a bizarre show being acted out in his mind.

“But I’m trapped in here same as you.” Cam’s recovered voice seemed overloud.

“No,” replied Snowpath. “You can get back into the mansion. The secret is in the Circle Room.”

Cam let out an exasperated sigh. “But how do I get back in there? The door is gone.”

“It changes on a schedule.