

Vincent Lakes



twinkle twinkle
Little Star

Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star - Vincent Lakes



Dedicated to my wife, Sharyn.

Keep on shining.



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by

Vincent Lakes

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1.

The constant rain of the early fall was drumming against the black pavement in front of the Eastridge General Hospital, when Kyle Richards, a first year medical student, parked his 1950 Chevrolet Fleetline to the side of the road. His parents had bought him the car as a graduation gift for finishing college. It was used but in excellent shape. Kyle was ecstatic for having a car, especially now, when he was going to apply for an evening job aside from spending the days at the school.

After putting out his cigarette, he stepped out of the car, gazing nervously at the old building. Kyle walked up to the heavy wooden door with four small windows shaped to form a perfect circle. Two grand statues, mounted on the wall with their heads reaching halfway to the second floor, guarded the main entrance.

The main building of the hospital was finished in 1891, originally known as the Lady Winters Hospital. It followed the typical gothic style of that time period, but unfortunately, the later expansions ruined the beautiful overview by looking like crude, ugly tumors growing around the richly decorated original building.

Lady Winters had been the wife of a wealthy local landlord, and she died after a long fierce battle against tuberculosis. The rich widow grieved the passing of his spouse, and in the middle of his deepest mourning, he decided to donate a large sum of money to build a new hospital to honor her memory. But over the next centuries, the hospital went through several renovations and expansions, until the city council finally decided to rename the once beautiful building, and simply called it the Eastridge General. However, they did not completely forget the generous benefactor. There is a simple bronze tablet hanging on the wall of the main lobby mentioning the name of the landlord. It is conveniently located in a far corner where no one ever goes, except for the housekeeper, who surely does not care for the message nor the dust it tends to collect.

Kyle walked through the lobby, ignoring the tablet among many other insignificant things, heading straight for the stairway across the hall. Eastridge General had a newly installed elevator as well, but Kyle figured it would save him some time if he just ran up the stairs. He was feeling nervous that morning, because he was meeting the Chief of Staff, Daniel White, about a possible job opening at the hospital. His father, Robert Richards, was a respected cardiologist in Springfield, and it was mostly because of his contacts why Kyle was now rushing through the white corridors.

Without being sure where exactly he was supposed to be heading, Kyle had to ask directions

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from the hospital staff he met along the way. Swearing quietly to himself for leaving so late, he finally managed to find the right place.

* * * * *

An older man, probably in his fifties, opened the door and glared at him like he was an unwanted wandering salesman with the latest collection of low quality shoes.

"Good morning, sir, I'm Kyle Richards, and I should have an appointment with Mr. White," he introduced himself nervously. "I'm deeply sorry for being late, but—"

The expression on the man's face changed completely and his face melted into a warm smile.

"Come on in," the man laughed, shaking his hand without allowing him to finish the sentence. "I'm Danny White. I've been expecting you, Kyle."

Kyle followed the man into a roomy office with a massive desk in the middle. A large bookshelf behind the desk was full of medical publications mostly concerning about general surgery. A small table next to the window had a selection of cubans and a small decanter of whiskey with some crystal clear glasses ready to be used. Long and heavy velvet curtains covered the window, closing out the depressing rainy view. It surely was an office worthy of his position, and Kyle felt himself awfully uneasy as Dr. White asked him to sit down.

"Would you care for an excellent cuban, Kyle?" the man offered, while reaching for the table without bothering to get off his chair.

"Sure, why not?" Kyle shrugged.

After a little while, they both were enjoying a very good quality cigar. Kyle had to admit that these cigars were as far from the Chesterfield -cigarettes he favored as a Cadillac was from his Chevy. He could not feel jealousy though, for he knew the same kind of perks would be available for him in a few years if he worked hard enough, and who knows, perhaps even more. Ambition was something Kyle certainly did not lack.

"So, Kyle, I received a phone call from your father a couple of weeks ago," Dr. White said, sweeping his fingers through his grey hair and blowing out a thick cloud of smoke. "He told me that you could use a job for the evenings through the winter, am I right?"

"That is correct, sir," Kyle confirmed, tasting the rich flavor of the cuban in his mouth.

"Now, unfortunately, you don't have the training yet to receive a position as a doctor on call,

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but I think we might have something for you,” Dr. White explained, but his smile was slowly dwindling, as if he was not sure if he should continue.

”Well, who would have known?”

”I’m interested, sir. I’m well aware of my lack of training, so pretty much anything will do for the first year. After all, money is money, sir,” he said, hoping to encourage Dr. White to tell him the rest of his offer instead of a vague *”something”*.

Dr. White sighed deeply as he finally made his decision. ”Very well then, Kyle. Come with me and I will explain your job description along the way. I need you to start tomorrow evening already, so there is no time to be wasted.”

After the cigars had been put out, Dr. White left the office with Kyle and headed towards the elevator.

”Your job is in the basement floor,” he said, ”as an operator of the hospital’s incinerator.”

”Beats cleaning toilets.”

”That sounds— interesting,” Kyle replied confusedly. He had a dim idea for the purpose of these machines; burning the removed tissue, amputated limbs and other organic hospital waste. In some states they were also used for the disposal of aborted fetuses, but in Missouri the interruption of pregnancy was illegal. He felt slight shivers running through his spine, but if he was going to become a doctor, a few torn limbs should not be bothering him too much.

”I know that job is usually handled by one of the janitors, but we just lost ours recently, and I cannot find a replacement for him fast enough,” Dr. White explained, then he paused for a moment and smiled. ”I suppose it was a lucky strike for me to receive that phone call,” he laughed, referring to Kyle’s father. ”It’s an easy, clean and relatively well paying job, mainly because of the odd working hours.”

”How late is the shift?” Kyle asked doubtfully. ”I’m just wondering because I need to study quite a lot,” he added.

”You just lift the incoming bags onto a steel cart on rails and push it into the furnace, then you push the button that starts the safety timer of ten seconds before the system automatically turns on the gas. You will have plenty of time to study at work, I can promise you that,” Dr. White winked at him and chuckled. ”The working hours are from 3pm to 11pm,” he then said, in a more serious manner. ”I hope that’s fine for you?”

Kyle nodded resolutely, ”Since I can read a little in here too, I don’t think the hours will be a problem.”

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"Excellent!" the old doctor said brightly as they stepped into the small elevator.

Most of the operating rooms were located on the first floor to allow emergency patients the shortest possible way from the ambulance. There was, however, an old reconstructed freight elevator, which was used sometimes to move hospital beds between the floors.

It felt like an eternity as the elevator slowly descended beneath the ground level, passing through the hill floor, which was still partially on the surface with small windows near the ceiling. Then, nothing. The lowest level of the hospital was called the tunnel floor, and all the creepiest things were located in there: the morgue, the test animals for the laboratory, and of course the incinerator.

A complete silence struck against their faces as they stepped out into a narrow concrete corridor. The elevator door seemed to be at the dead end of an endless hallway, disappearing somewhere into the distance. Dirty yellow lights, placed really far from each other, created a dark gloomy atmosphere that was amplified by several broken bulbs. The plain concrete ceiling was low, and together with the seemingly converging walls, it was hard not to feel slightly claustrophobic.

Dr. White walked with a fast pace, almost like wanting to get out of there as fast as possible. He had to bend his neck to prevent his head from hitting the bare light bulbs.

"You better be careful when moving in here by yourself," the old man said quietly.

"Thank you, Dr. White, I'm sure I'll be alright," Kyle answered confidently, but in his mind he was having strong second thoughts about coming to this horrible place all by himself. Only his stubborn nature that refused to reveal a weakness like that kept his mouth shut. He did not want to think about the chance of getting lost in these god-forsaken corridors. Biting hard on his lip, Kyle continued to follow the old doctor around another corner.

"Like spending an evening in a submarine."

Finally, after a time that felt like infinity, they arrived to a locked, heavy steel door.

"Here we are!" Dr. White announced cheerfully, which was such a brutal contrast against the environment.

* * * * *

Behind the steel door was a large room, almost like a hall, with the ceiling much higher than the corridors, a detail Kyle was pleased to notice. In the middle of the room was a large furnace, tall enough for a man to stand inside. The steel cart, which Dr. White had mentioned earlier, was parked

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on rails in front of the furnace. Two huge, round tanks were attached to the side of the furnace, connected by a number of long pipes with valves and meters along the way. One of the tanks was for propane and the other one held oxygen, which were the source of heat that would burn any organic waste at a fast rate, including all the harder substances, like bones, as well. On the right side of the machine was a large crate for the ashes. Kyle was looking around to see a way for the crate to be pulled out, but there was none. Dr. White chuckled as he noticed this and explained to him that the crate was actually just barely small enough to be dragged out through the door.

On the left side of the machine was a doorway to the next room, which was a small space to spend time when there was nothing else to do. The room had a small desk, a comfortable looking chair, a sink table with a coffee maker, and at the back of the room was another door, leading to the toilet.

"So, my job is to load that cart up and turn the incinerator on before I leave?" Kyle wanted to make sure he understood the job description.

Dr. White nodded solemnly. "Precisely."

"Who brings the waste down here?" Kyle presented the next logical question. "And who delivers the ashes out?" He then continued.

"A janitor performs both of those tasks, and I'm sure he can also tell you much more about this job than I could ever do, so it might be a really good idea to talk to him as soon as you get a chance."

"Alright, I have only one last question," Kyle then said. "Why did the old guy quit?"

"Oh, the old guy didn't quit," Dr. White said regretfully, probably realizing that it was a matter he should have brought up earlier. "He committed a suicide, fried himself in that incinerator."

"I am going to love this job."

2.

The work outfit was light and felt fairly comfortable as Kyle walked towards the elevator that would take him down to the first circle of hell, a nickname for the distressing tunnel floor he had come up with when telling his girlfriend, Helen, about his new job. She had laughed at his rant, and then reminded how lucky he actually was to get a clean indoor job for the winter. Everything would be delivered to him in black plastic bags; there would be no mess, the place was warm, and he would have plenty of time to work on his studies. It sounded like a perfect job for a student like him, and it could have been, if only the place was not so creepy.

After a few minutes, Kyle stepped out of the elevator into the same concrete corridor he had walked with Dr. White. Concentrating really hard, he walked slowly to make sure he would not make a wrong turn at any point, and eventually he made it safely to the familiar steel door.

The key turned in the lock, causing a light echo bouncing off the concrete walls. He opened the door and walked inside. The incinerator room had the same kind of bare bulbs hanging in the ceiling as the long corridors outside, but in here they all actually worked, which was already a great improvement in itself. Closing the door behind him, Kyle sighed and swallowed hard, trying to ease his dry throat.

He headed straight into the smaller side room to drop off his modest dinner, which was nothing more than a sandwich and a can of coke. Fortunately, he ate at the school before coming to the hospital, so he should make it home just fine.

Without wasting any time, he decided to start working right away, and see if he could have some spare time later for a cup of coffee and a little bit of studying.

Sweeping through his trimmed short hair, Kyle moved over to the machine and opened the steel gate in front of it to release the cart from inside, rolling it out easily. The janitor who should be bringing him more waste to burn had also operated the incinerator while the hospital management had been searching for a new janitor. Kyle began his work by unloading the ashes from the cart and shoveling them into the large crate waiting by the furnace. Him being there now should tremendously lighten the workload of the other janitor.

A strange, barely audible sound caught Kyle's attention while he was working. The loud clatter caused by the iron shovel almost prevented him from hearing it, but as he paused and listened carefully, he heard nothing. The idea of having rats down in the basement together with him did not sound overly tempting, but realizing his restricted options to do anything about it at the

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moment, he decided it was better to continue, and maybe bring a trap with him tomorrow in case it really was a rat.

A few more shovels of light grey and white ash flew into the crate, and then he heard it again.

"That's not a rat," he mumbled to himself as he placed the shovel against the crate and turned around.

The sound came from the other side of the incinerator, almost as if someone was humming quietly with a fragile voice. Kyle passed the cart and approached the other side of the room, and then he saw it: a little girl sitting on the floor, leaning against the cold wall of the furnace. She could not be more than five or six years old. A ragged teddy bear was hanging in her other hand, but she did not seem to pay any attention to it. Humming quietly along a traditional nursery rhyme, she did not seem to notice Kyle at all.

*"Then the traveller in the dark,
Thanks you for your tiny spark,
He could not see which way to go,
If you did not twinkle so.
Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!"*

Something was so wrong with this whole picture, fighting against the common sense. He was absolutely stunned by finding this child there.

Then, the child stopped singing and turned her blue eyes at Kyle, who almost screamed in sudden terror. There, right in front of him, he witnessed the girl's eyes melting away, dripping down on her blistered face. Her skin was scorched like she had been thrown into a fire, and somehow crawled out of it still alive. She was in an horridly unnatural condition. Kyle's mind was stuck on insisting that she should have been dead, and yet, there she was, staring at him with her grossly bubbling eyes, like they were small balls of wax thrown into a pot of boiling water.

"Who are you?" He cried out, retreating away from this devil's child, but there was no answer, just a strange knocking sound like somebody was hitting a steel plate with a fist, causing the echoes to fly around in the large space. The girl was still staring at him. He wanted to turn his head away, but he was not able to do that. Locked into those terrifying eyes, he wanted to run away, but his feet were frozen still, and he was unable to move away from the haunting girl. But then, something happened. All of a sudden, Kyle gained back his mobility. Twisting his body painfully

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around, he stumbled on his own feet and fell over.

"Hello? Is there anybody in there?" A dull voice carried through the thick door.

Kyle struggled to get up from the floor. He had a strong urge to open the door, for somehow he realized in his chaotic mind that salvation was behind that door. Glancing quickly over his shoulder to make sure that the ghost was not following him, he was struck by a new surprise and he had to take a second look to be sure. The girl was gone; there was nothing around the incinerator.

* * * * *

Wiping off some cold sweat from his forehead, Kyle opened the door and saw a fat man with a sloppy black beard standing outside. This man looked like he had just escaped from prison, but there was something in his eyes that made a difference, certain kindness that softened the harsh appearance. He was dragging a scaffold lifted on a wheeled rack behind him.

"Hey there, are you alright?" the man asked gruffly.

Kyle nodded, recovering fast from the shock caused by something that had to be a bad hallucination.

"Sure thing, come on in," he urged promptly. He would greatly appreciate the company, until he could be sure the fallacy he had experienced was truly over.

"I'm Hugh Barnes, and I came to deliver the first load of the day as well as to take out last night's ashes," the large man explained, while he pulled the rack inside. A single black bag was lying at the bottom of the scaffold. Hugh noticed Kyle's pale face and misunderstood the meaning of it.

"Don't worry, my friend, these bags are so tightly sealed there is absolutely no fear of them leaking or anything."

"Yes, sure, thank you," Kyle faltered, "I'm Kyle Richards, I'm the new guy."

"No shit."

"Very nice to meet you, Kyle Richards," Hugh chuckled as he parked the rack in front of the crate.

"Care to join me for some coffee?" Kyle then asked. He was still feeling shaky and did not want to be left alone so soon.

Hugh scratched his bearded cheek. "Well, I suppose I could have some. After all, it's almost time for a break anyway."

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Hugh was open and friendly, down to earth kind of a guy, who actually enjoyed his job as a hospital janitor. Since he had always been more or less of a loner, he found the job where he had to spend most of his time in the tunnel floor most rewarding. Kyle was happy to know he would have someone like Hugh to visit him every day for the entire winter. The memory of the ghost child was already fading in his mind as they got into entertaining chatter while tasting the strong coffee. But then, Hugh asked something that brought him right back to the events of that day.

"So, what was going on when I arrived here? Took awfully long time before you opened the door,"

Staring down to his half empty cup, Kyle was not really sure how to answer. Hugh interpreted the silence all wrong, thinking he had insulted Kyle somehow.

"Look, man, I was just worried, and would like to make sure you're okay," he tried to make himself more clear, but Kyle waved his hands and shook his head as a sign to slow down.

"I'm not really sure what was wrong," he then said, "but I think I was hallucinating for a while there," he chuckled nervously, but instead of laughing and letting it go, Hugh's smile died on his lips.

"Can you tell me what kind of hallucinations you were having?" he asked grimly, and the light cheerfulness in his gentle eyes was suddenly replaced by a sinister darkness.

Kyle glanced sharply at the man. "I saw a small child," he said truthfully, "a small, burned, horribly blistered child."

Hugh's face had turned ashen. "Say no more, my friend, for I know what you saw."

"Did you see the same when you worked here?" Kyle asked, meaning those times when Hugh had to use the incinerator while there was no regular guy around at all, but he shook his head firmly.

"No, I did not see anything, but I believe Morgan Melford saw them, the janitor who worked here before you."

Kyle swallowed hard as his throat dried out. "Them?" He groaned.

The large man leaned back in his chair and nodded. "That's right. Towards the end poor Morgan saw several ghosts of tormented children. I know this because he told me just a few days before he took his own life," Hugh sighed sadly. "Morgan was a good man, but I have to admit that for a moment I truly thought he had gone insane when I heard his story, but now—" he paused, shrugging helplessly. "—I don't know," he sighed deeply again.

Kyle was suffering from helpless anger that he was unable to point towards anything, which

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made it even worse. Most likely it was all just a creation of the desperate situation he had been thrown into without much of a warning, and even if he had been warned, what would have been needed for him to take it into account? He had never, even in his wildest dreams, thought of working at a place like this, burning severed limbs and other disgusting things. The whole new acquaintance of the hospital's underworld had been feeding his wild imagination from the moment he came here with Dr. White. Perhaps old Morgan could not take it anymore and wanted out - by any means necessary.

"Yeah, sure. After couple of decades in the basement, poor old Morgan just finally lost it. Keep feeding these lies to yourself and maybe one day you will actually believe them."

Kyle was well aware of how crazy such a coincidence was, but it was the best reason he had so far - a hundred times better than admitting to himself that he actually saw a ghost.

A short hysterical laughter escaped his lips as he thought of the absurdness of the situation. Hugh glanced at him worriedly.

"Are you alright?" He wanted to know.

"Yes, I'm good," Kyle replied. This whole thing just did not make much sense to him. "Do you know if Morgan saw these ghosts during the entire time he worked here?" He then asked.

"That's what keeps me wondering, you see, I noticed a change in him about two years ago, and I don't think the children appeared before that. Old Morgan worked here for 18 years altogether," Hugh explained. "Maybe something happened that made him begin to see the ghosts?"

"I'm not sure," Kyle answered truthfully, "but I would surely like to find out. Can you tell me how exactly did he change?"

"Well, he had always been a light-hearted fellow, and we laughed a lot while playing cards during breaks, but then everything changed almost exactly two years ago. Morgan turned quiet and somber, as if he was suddenly carrying a dire burden on his shoulders. But he never mentioned the children until only couple of weeks before his death. I think he just couldn't take it anymore."

"Great minds think alike."

Hugh smiled sadly and sighed. "He was a good man, Kyle, not the kind you'd think to slide into madness like that."

* * * * *

After sitting around for another half an hour, Hugh finally excused himself, stood up and

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headed back to the main room.

"I'll see you later, Kyle," he said, "I hope you can figure this all out, but don't do anything crazy like jump into the oven," Hugh pointed at the furnace and winked.

"I'm not planning on it, but thanks Hugh," Kyle laughed nervously. Hugh attached the crate to his rack after unloading the black bag into the cart. The scaffold and the crate formed a handy short train together.

"I will return later and bring back the crate before it's time to ignite the oven," he said on his way out.

"I'll be here," Kyle promised, closing the door as soon as Hugh got his train out to the corridor.

Hugh made two more visits during the evening, returning the crate on his last one. It was 10:30pm, almost time to go home, and Kyle had not seen a single ghost since the first one. He was starting to seriously suspect that it was a stress-related reaction, and would probably never occur again as he would get more and more used to work in that creepy place. He was confident that his overly vivacious imagination would calm down over time, and simply adapt to the prevailing environment.

After pushing the steel cart inside the furnace, Kyle closed the hatch and activated the timer. A quiet rustle carried from the pipes as the propane and the oxygen began to mix inside the chamber. In ten seconds, the extremely inflammable gas mixture would ignite, and all the hospital waste was to be consumed by the intense fire within a few hours.

Once the timer ticked all the way through, two metallic heads at the ceiling of the chamber were charged with high voltage, eventually causing an electric arc, which kindled the gas causing an enormous exploding firestorm inside the furnace. After staring at the raging flames for a while, he turned around and walked out of the room. The first day at his new job was finally over.

An idea of sharing this spooky experience with Helen crossed his mind, but after a brief consideration, he decided to abandon it for being a little too much. He did not want her to think he was suddenly having mental issues. It would cause more problems without solving any of the old ones. No, he would keep this to himself for now.

3.

Having difficulties to focus at school, Kyle was almost ecstatic once the classes were over for the day. The previous night had been terrible as he spent most of it by tossing and turning in the bed unable to fall asleep. He tried to convince himself to believe that the ghost he saw was only a product of his own imagination, and that this evening would be just as uneventful as the last one had been after Hugh's visit, but still, he felt nervous and restless throughout the entire day. When combined with itching eyes and a dawning headache, it was not a hard task to predict there would be an agonizing night ahead. Burning through a couple of cigarettes along the way to the hospital, he was feeling slightly nauseous as he climbed out from his Chevy.

Procrastinating as much as he could, Kyle barely made it to work in time. He had absolutely no desire to drag himself down to the place where he had spent the most horrendous first day. He knew there were no options really, unless he walked into Dr. White's office and resigned, but that would have created a pile of new problems. Explaining why he had quit to his girlfriend would be bad, but still nothing compared to explaining his father why he had done such a disservice to his colleague and a friend.

No, he needed to get over this silly fear and do his job like he was expected. A little bit of determination would get him through this ordeal.

The old stained concrete walls seemed as unfriendly as ever, when Kyle headed towards the incinerator. He started up some coffee as soon as he made it through the depressing tunnel floor, knowing that he was going to need some to stay awake for the entire evening. So far there had been no danger of falling asleep, whatsoever. The memories of the ghostly encounter were hovering strongly in the back of his mind.

Kyle did everything that was supposed to become his routine for the long months of the winter; pulled out the cart from the cold incinerator, emptied the ashes into the crate and received the first load of new waste from Hugh. The old janitor did not stay for coffee this time, but they exchanged a few words before he dragged the cart out. Everything was going well so far, and as the first break was getting closer, Kyle found himself relaxing a little.

Like some kind of a miracle, reading the microbiology book was about to slide him asleep, which would have been fine since Hugh would wake him up soon anyway, but the luxury of sleep was taken from him as he heard something from behind the wall that would assuredly provide him sleepless nights for a long time to come.

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*"Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!
Up above the world so high,
Like a diamond in the sky.
Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!"*

"This is not happening."

Closing the book and shutting his eyes tightly, he made a desperate attempt to stop the haunting voice with a loud scream, hoping it would somehow counteract the overwhelmingly dreary feeling caused by the ghostly rhyme. He inhaled, filling his lungs with stuffy air, and then used it all for a long constant cry, but the cursed voice persisted alongside the remaining echoes of his cry.

*"When the blazing sun is gone,
When he nothing shines upon,
Then you show your little light,
Twinkle, twinkle, all the night.
Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!"*

"This is not fucking happening!"

Kyle laid his book down on the desk and tried to get up. His forehead was covered in cold sweat again; his knees felt weak as he took the first wobbly steps towards the main room. He did not want to see, but for some odd reason, he just had to. Somehow he figured it was the only way to make it stop, and even though he already knew what to expect, the view in the main room still caught him by surprise.

Three children were standing in a small circle by the incinerator, humming the same old rhyme. Holding each other's hands, they did not seem to notice Kyle's presence at all - it seemed all too familiar. He saw their dark, lifeless eyes, their scorched blackened skin with open wounds oozing out rotten fluids. But where these children should have been writhing in pain, succumbing to their gruesome injuries, they were calmly standing there, singing with their voices full of heartbreaking yearning.

Breathing heavily, Kyle attempted to stay focused and lucid, but his overly stressed and exhausted body refused to follow his wish. He collapsed on the floor with a noisy thud, gaining a

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precious break from the cruel reality.

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The room was empty when Kyle slowly revived. He dragged his worn body against the wall to have something to lean against. Gazing around with leery eyes, he saw nothing under the dim lights around the furnace. Once again, the room was silent and empty.

"I can't take this," he sobbed quietly, but glad for the fact that Hugh was not there yet. Apparently, he had been unconscious for only about an hour, which would leave him plenty of time before the janitor's next scheduled visit was due. With a wild grimace on his face, Kyle forced himself up and staggered back to the smaller room. He slumped into the chair and reached for the can of soda he had left on the desk. Hoping to find some aspirins for his pounding head, he opened the wooden drawer next to him, but found no medicine from there. A worn, leather-covered book that looked like some kind of a diary with a name scraped on the cover of it lied inside, being the only item in the whole drawer.

"Morgan Melford," he read the scrawled letters. Kyle was not too excited to read a dead man's journal, but perhaps it could provide him some valuable information, after all, Morgan had to deal with this haunted place for years. Maybe he could actually find out what triggered these tormented wraiths to come forth. That kind of insight could turn out to be most helpful.

With quivering hands, Kyle picked up the book and carefully opened the first page. It turned out very soon that the book was not exactly a real diary, but more like a collection of notes and thoughts starting as early as June, 1954, so Morgan had been adding to this book for four years.

The first pages contained rather humorous comments about new nurses he had spotted on his way to work, stories about evil deeds the cold winter weather had done to his car and just philosophical ponderings about the odds and ends of life. But then, around the fall, 1956, the whole nature of the diary changed into something dreadful. The entries quickly turned from light and funny into vague and disturbing as Morgan sank deeper into his madness caused by the lingering ghosts. Kyle felt sorry for the old janitor, but in a strange way, he was also relieved. Knowing that he was not the only one seeing them made the burden a little lighter to bear.

Towards the end of the diary, Morgan's writing became almost impossible to understand. A couple of lines here and there lacking any detail, a clear sign of his fading sanity as he desperately tried to keep working there, and eventually, it had been too much for the old man.

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"Don't stare at the children," one of the carelessly scrawled notes was caught by Kyle's keen eyes. He could not be sure whether that was some mindless nonsense or an actual advice for whoever might be reading this book. Whatever it was, he decided to memorize it because for some reason it felt important.

Morgan had made it through four years. Kyle would need to make through one semester, but he was not sure if he could, for he was already exhausted and tired after working just two days.

Letting out a deep sigh, Kyle finally stood up and began to make some coffee. Hugh would be arriving soon with his disgusting cargo, and Kyle wanted to have a cup before that. There was still a long day ahead.

* * * * *

Friday night. A promise of relief was hanging in the air as Kyle worked hard to unload the cart. The weekend would be truly blessed time far from the incinerator; a moment of freedom outside of these concrete walls. Even the ghosts seemed to be letting him off easy this time as there was absolutely no disturbances during the time from his arrival to Hugh's first visit. Kyle could not help feeling nervous though, so far he had been facing them once every day, thus he was almost hoping to see a glimpse of them to get it done, but the children remained absent. Hugh came, spent a while with him at the small room by a warm steaming cup of fresh coffee, and then he was gone.

The old janitor agreed that something had definitely triggered Morgan's, and now apparently, also Kyle's dark visions, but that was all the help he was able to offer. The extremely burned appearance of the children made them look like someone had thrown them into the furnace, but Hugh did not remember of such incident ever happening. After all, such a malicious action would have spread all over the newspapers in Eastridge. Somehow Kyle needed to find a way to provide peace for these restless souls, but he had no clue where to even start, and if he fails to figure out something soon enough, he would be sharing Morgan's fate.

After doing all the required tasks in the beginning of the day, Kyle spent the rest of the time reading and receiving the black bags from Hugh at even intervals, and the night seemed to be ending as well as it had begun.

During the last couple of hours, right before it was time to set off the incinerator again, a sound coming from the main room startled Kyle so badly that he spilled some of his coffee on the desk. It sounded like someone was digging through the bags loaded into the cart, but who would do

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such a thing at this time of the night. People had to have better things to do than that.

"Hey, honey, how about we skip the dinner at the five star restaurant and go to the hospital for some adventuring? Oh, I don't know, dig around the funny looking bags and see what we can find. I've heard severed limbs can be such fun to play with!"

"Well, it certainly beats the wraiths," he chuckled to himself as he silently walked to the main room.

There was a man wearing a doctor's white coat, working on something around the cart. Unsure if this man even knew about the new incinerator guy, Kyle decided to be polite and coughed lightly to gain his attention instead of using a rude approach.

The man glanced behind himself when he heard the cough and smiled, looking rather embarrassed. He seemed to be in his forties, slightly grey hair on the sides, slim built, almost athletic. He jumped down from the cart with great agility and approached Kyle.

"Hello there," he greeted politely, "I wasn't expecting anyone to be here at this time."

"I'm the new guy," Kyle said.

"You are doing it again!"

"I am Dr. Donovan Cole, the leading orthopedist of Eastridge General," the man introduced himself, offering his hand for a shake.

"Kyle Richards, a medical student. I'm working here through the first semester," he replied, but the suspicious glare never vanished from his eyes, and Dr. Cole noticed that.

"Excuse me," he laughed, "I had to follow the janitor here because he forgot to pick up one more load from a late surgery, I am so sorry if this causes any inconvenience to you, but it would have been a bad idea to leave that bag upstairs over the weekend."

"It's not a problem," Kyle said, relaxing a little. The doctor's explanation made perfect sense, even though doctors visiting the incinerator room was extremely rare, despite the fact that Dr. White had been there just a few days earlier with him. "I was about to start the incinerator anyway and head home soon, so I would say you made it just in time," he added, having a much friendlier tone in his voice now.

Donovan smirked. "I'm glad to hear that," he said, "I will stop bothering you now, so that you can get back to your work. I wish you a great weekend, Mr. Richards." Then, without waiting for an answer, Dr. Cole left the room, leaving Kyle to stare quietly after him.

Finally Kyle shrugged and went on to start the machine. The cart rolled effortlessly inside and the timer began to tick as soon as Kyle pressed the button on the control panel by the furnace

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hatch. He stood in front of the furnace, waiting for the flames to burst out as a sign for his day to be over, and finally it happened. The chamber was filled with hungry fire that began to eat the waste away. The flames created faintly flickering shadows around the walls being so much brighter than the dim yellow bulbs on the ceiling. And there they were, standing by the incinerator, the ghostly children!

Not in a circle like before, but standing in a row, all of them staring at him with their blackened eyes. Kyle felt creeping coldness in his heart as the fear was rapidly growing like the flames in the furnace, eating away his soul. This time the children were not singing, but just staring at him judgementally, almost like blaming him for their dismal fate. Kyle did not know why, he could not comprehend the change. Previously ignorant spirits were clearly showing signs of anger at him.

"Don't stare at the children!"

Remembering the line from Morgan's diary, Kyle followed the advice without fully understanding the meaning of it, but he had to do something. He had to get away from them!

He laid his eyes on the dirty floor, and for his great surprise, he found himself breathing a little easier. Avoiding any visual contact with the glaring children, Kyle abandoned the incinerator, realizing there was nothing left to be done, and so he ran through the tunnel floor as fast as his feet could carry him. He did not look back before making it to the elevator, and when he did, there was nothing but an endless dull corridor, grimacing at him like the mouth of the black furnace seemed to do sometimes. Kyle prayed for the elevator to move faster, and a huge wave of relief washed over him as the door finally opened.

Once making it all the way back home, he quickly navigated to the big cabinet in the living room and opened a bottle of Jim Beam with shivering hands, causing his girlfriend to get upset, but he chose not to care. He desperately required something to soothe his cringed nerves. Fortunately, he would have a whole weekend to recover before going back.

Leaning back in his soft, comfortable chair, he took another lengthy sip from his glass and sighed hopelessly.

4.

The week began way too soon. Kyle had not been able to sleep properly, and by Monday morning, he was starting to look like a ghost himself. Helen was leering worriedly at his ashen face during their breakfast, until she finally decided to speak.

"What is wrong with you, Kyle?" She asked softly, but the man just glared at her without answering. He really did not feel comfortable enough to tell her what was wrong, even though he knew that by continuing to behave like that it would be just a matter of time before she would pack her stuff and leave. Kyle surely did not want that, but at the same time he was afraid that telling the truth might have the same result.

Eventually, the depressing silence worked itself out as Helen walked away accompanied by a deep sigh. She was worried about him, but the complete lack of response was awfully frustrating. Kyle did not care to fix the situation right there, for he really had no strength for it, so instead, he just picked up his cigarettes and a sandwich for the evening, and then headed outside. He would have a long day at school before diving into the darkness again.

He could not stop thinking about the children and the change that had happened between the appearances. The ghosts seemed truly angry after ignoring him for a couple of days. Last time the haunting rhyme had been absent, but Kyle had no clue how to link these sudden differences to anything.

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The incinerator waited for him silently under the gloomy lights. The cold furnace was full of ash after the large load from the Friday night had been completely consumed. Kyle took his sandwich to the side room and started his routine.

Hugh arrived on time to pick up the cart, and he could not ignore what he saw. The dark circles around Kyle's eyes and his pale face made him look like a walking corpse.

"Maybe you should take a few days off?" He suggested, but Kyle shook his head.

"No, I'm fine, Hugh," he replied with a voice that sounded like scrubbing two pieces of dry paper together.

"Suit yourself. You just don't look too good at all," Hugh shrugged helplessly.

"Cut it out," Kyle snapped, ending the conversation. He knew the miserable state he was in,

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feeling twice as bad as he looked, but he did not know what to do.

Trapped and chained down in the incinerator room, Kyle needed to find an answer, or he would simply fall off the edge of sanity. The children were in his dreams now, either singing the same old rhyme, or just staring at him, almost like expecting him to do something. He had suffered from these tormenting nightmares through the entire weekend, resulting in him having hardly any sleep.

Hugh gave him a long pitiful look before leaving.

"You're starting to sound like poor Morgan did a few weeks before his death," he mumbled to himself as he dragged the scaffold out.

Clearly hearing his words, Kyle chose not to respond. He retreated to the side room and sat down to relax for a while, listening as the thick steel door was closed and the squeaking sound of the rack's wheels slowly disappearing into the distance.

Kyle rested his head against the wall. His head was pounding and he heard the blood rushing in his veins, but while listening to his steady heartbeat and peaceful breathing, a kind of miracle happened. He sailed off to a light sleep, which was so much better than the nightmares that had been haunting him lately. But like all the good things, this one as well was bound to end way too soon.

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Drowsy Kyle trailed back to the incinerator room alarmed by a strange noise. If he would have been fully awake, he might have been able to connect the noise with the one he heard on Friday night, however, he immediately realized what it was when he saw Dr. Cole by the cart.

"Oh! I didn't know you start so early," Dr. Cole said, smiling at him.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Dr. Cole?" Kyle asked, trying to hold back a sleepy yawn, but partially failing in his attempt.

"Not much I'm afraid," he laughed nervously. "One of my nurses managed to lose a very valuable surgical instrument, and I wanted to make sure it didn't get dropped into the bag along with the waste," Dr. Cole glanced at the furnace and smiled again. "I think that thing can melt even steel," he then said, pointing at the machine.

"Well, I do believe that any instrument that goes through the incinerator would be quite useless after such treatment," Kyle confirmed. "Did you find it?"

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"No, I did not. I will have to keep looking upstairs. For the nurse's sake, I really do hope I'll find it. Those instruments cost a fortune," he snorted. "I'm really sorry to bother you like this again, Mr. Richards. I'll be on my way now."

Dr. Cole left with a little twitching steps, indicating his nervousness, like a kid being caught from the candy shelf without permission.

Kyle waited until Cole's footsteps disappeared, then he laid his eyes on the black bag that was carelessly shut in a hurry. Perhaps a doctor could come down to the tunnel floor every once in a great while, but twice within so short time was more than suspicious.

Climbing up on top of the cart was very easy, peeking inside the bag was not. The foul stench hit Kyle's face as he cracked the mouth to see inside. He had to struggle against the instant nausea that brought an overwhelming urge to throw up.

"Rather embarrassing move from a potential doctor."

The bag was filled with unrecognizable bloody mess with the wraps and organic tissue mixed together to create something that looked disgusting beyond words. There were no limbs this time, which could be considered being lucky, even though luck was not the first word that came to Kyle's mind when describing this hideous task. He had to roll the bag further open to see properly in the bad light, and as he was doing that, something in the bag caught his eye. Partially hidden under the filthy bandages and cloth wraps, he saw something larger than just a piece of a vein or a tissue. It did not resemble a limb or a bone, but something far worse, and as Kyle did his best to move the covering garbage out of the way, the ugly truth was revealed to him piece by piece. There was a dead baby lying in the waste bag, an overgrown fetus that had been taken out. Kyle did not dare to touch the corpse that looked tormented, hands and legs in unnatural positions and the little skull brutally crushed. Turning his head aside as a desperate attempt to get some fresh air, he paused there for a moment, trying to figure out what he was supposed to do.

Finally, he decided to close the bag and wait for Hugh. Maybe he could give an idea what there was to be done. Surgical abortions were illegal in Missouri, and it was more than likely that Donovan Cole had sneaked this corpse into the bag.

"But why would anybody do anything like this?" Kyle asked from himself, knowing the answer before reaching the end of the question. Money. Women with enough money surely wanted to avoid the shame of giving birth to a bastard child, and thus opening a whole new black market for the surgeons to make some extra outside of their regular jobs.

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Hugh pondered for a good while after hearing about Kyle's shocking revelation, then he took a long sip from his coffee and lit a cigarette.

"Well, that explains a thing or two," he said sadly, inhaling the smoke deep into his lungs. "So, the children are restless souls that have been denied the life they could have had." A thin wreath of smoke crawled out from between his teeth as he spoke.

Kyle nodded with a dusky shadow upon his face. A whole lot was suddenly making sense; the angry appearance after starting the incinerator on Friday, the blistering skin of the wraiths, and even the one-liner in Morgan's diary, "Don't stare at the children."

The eyes are traditionally thought of being the window to the soul, and the souls of these poor children are damned to linger here almost like in purgatory. Kyle remembered the relief he had felt when turning his eyes away from them, losing contact with the frustrated and hateful spirits desperately seeking their way out of this world.

"Now what?" Hugh wondered, but Kyle had no clear answer.

"Somehow I have to make sure it's Dr. Cole before talking to the Chief of Staff."

"I might be able to help you with that," Hugh said, putting out his cigarette.

"Tell me," Kyle encouraged, for any help at this point would be highly appreciated.

"Well, I can try to lurk around to see if I could get my hands on Cole's schedule, which could give us a clue when he's going to perform his next abortion."

"That would be great," Kyle smiled, and for the first time since the arrival to this horrid place, there was hope sparkling in his eyes.

The children did not appear at all that day.

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Before turning the incinerator on, Kyle climbed back on the cart and removed the tiny corpse from the bag. Wrapping it in a cloth he had asked Hugh to bring, he slid it inside the paper bag he used to carry his sandwich.

On his way home, he took one of the small sand roads branching off the route 160, stopped at the edge of the forest and buried the little fellow under some naked oak trees. After looking around for a while, he found a larger twig from the ground that somewhat resembled a cross and

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mounted it on top of the grave. The cold autumn wind made his face tingle as he spent a silent moment to honor the memory of this child who was not given a chance, then he returned to his Chevy and drove off.

5.

Donovan Cole's Ford Thunderbird, model of 1955, followed the Route 160 towards the intercepting Route 65 so fast that Kyle had problems keeping up with his Chevy. Cole was heading to the northside of the town, where the wealthier people lived. This would have been an easy guess to begin with as Kyle was pretty sure the price for the service, offered by Dr. Cole, was outrageously high.

Hugh had found Cole's schedule for the entire week, and there were couple of days when he had marked himself a shorter day at the hospital. Of course it had been a long shot, but as it seemed now, their first guess was about to hit a bull's eye. The only factor Cole really had to worry about in his business was time. Since there was no markings in Morgan's diary about Cole's visits to the incinerator room, it was likely that he had sneaked there after Morgan had left the place, and then, Cole simply overrode the security switch with a key that was held in the side room, and tossed the corpses into the fire. His first mistake was getting caught by the incinerator, which could have been easily passed by Kyle, but the second mistake, especially since it happened so soon after the first one, had truly raised an alarm in Kyle's head. Cole had become careless after Morgan's death.

Thunderbird pulled off to the side of the rainy road. Kyle slowed down, looking for a good parking spot, leaving safe distance between him and his target. He lit a cigarette while climbing out of his car, and began to walk towards the house he saw Cole entering with a dark briefcase in his hand.

It was a large house with two stories. The first floor was made of stone bricks, while the second one had a fancy wooden panel. The yard was not too big, but that was the case for every house along that road. Everything was indicating that whoever lived in this house had an excellent financial status.

The shadows flickered against the curtains as the people moved inside the house. Kyle was not rushing with his cigarette, observing carefully what was happening. After a while, he saw them moving upstairs. Desperately wanting to see what was going on, Kyle noticed a fire escape route installed to this house: a steel ladder attached to the outer wall, leading up to a window in the second floor. If he would get caught by doing this, he might get into a really big trouble, but he had to see with his own eyes what was happening in that room.

He threw off the cigarette and saw it going out as it fell on to the water-covered sidewalk, then he walked across the wet lawn after making sure no one was watching. Climbing up the

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deviously slippery ladder was dangerous, but somehow he made it all the way up without causing too much noise - not enough to alarm anybody in the room.

Only a pair of thin cloth curtains veiled the second floor window, allowing Kyle a clear view into the room. A woman in her thirties seemed awfully edgy as Dr. Cole was preparing a small table by dragging some tools from his briefcase. There was also a third person in the room, a ragged looking guy. A working class man who probably was the lover of this high lady. Kyle guessed they had been playing together in the absence of her husband, and an unfortunate accident had occurred. Now they were ready for anything to keep this little incident as a secret from her man. A classic case, perfect for someone like Donovan Cole to make profit.

He saw Cole asking the woman to lie down and spread her legs. When she did this, her loose shirt pressed against her body, revealing that her pregnancy was already quite far. The table consisted of several different instruments; a tool that looked like steel pliers, a loopknife and a basin. On the other side he had some towels and warm water in another basin.

Despite the fact that he already had a strong suspicion before coming to this place, Kyle was utterly shocked to see this doctor preparing to perform an abortion, shamelessly ignoring the progressed condition of the mother. When Dr. Cole picked up the pliers from the table, Kyle had to look away. He had seen enough.

After climbing down the ladder, he rushed back to his car, lit another cigarette with his badly shivering hands and accelerated away. The windshield wipers barely managed to maintain a minimum visibility, and eventually, Kyle had to slow down. The autumnal storms were not something to play with. He would have to see Dr. White first thing in the morning, but before that he needed to rush back to the hospital, where his shift was about to begin.

* * * * *

That night the children appeared again, chanting quietly in their circle, ignoring Kyle's presence once again. He watched them, not scared anymore, but deeply sorry for their fate. The mere cruelty of the abortion method sent chills running down on his spine, but he found comfort in the thought that Dr. Cole's private circus was coming to an end. As soon as Dr. White would hear what he had to say, he would cut off all Cole's criminal activities.

The microbiology book did not seem very interesting that night, for the atrocity he had witnessed continued to distract him no matter how hard he tried to push it aside. There was nothing

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he could do about it right now, and the fear of meeting Cole again later that night - knowing what he was doing there - was almost overwhelming.

"Disgusted" was a perfect word to describe Hugh's impression as Kyle revealed Cole's dirty secret.

"We gotta nail him," he said ferociously.

"I'm going to," Kyle promised, telling about his plan to talk to the Chief of Staff next morning.

Hugh nodded approvingly. "That'll do nicely," he added.

Later at night when Kyle had loaded the furnace and ignited it, he left the room and walked around the corner, hiding in a small alcove where a lot of cleaning supplies had been stored. He wanted to see if Cole would sneak in to throw his latest victim into the fire, and he did. Barely 15 minutes later, he heard footsteps approaching the incinerator room. A shadowy figure stopped by the steel door and searched through his pockets. It was an easy task to recognise Dr. Cole's silhouette against the dim light. Doctors had no problems to obtain the key to access anything in the hospital, which is why Kyle was not surprised at all when he saw Cole entering by using his own key.

Kyle did not bother to wait any longer. Silently he passed the door and saw the dark figure of Cole walking towards the brightly flaming furnace. That was all he managed to see before he was on his way outside, having mixed emotions of sadness and anger inside his heart. He had nothing against the abortion in general, and in most cases, Kyle was a supporter, despising the law that prohibited the procedure. An abortion was often a needed sacrifice to preserve the mother's life, and in some unwanted pregnancies, like those poor victims of a rape, it should have been perfectly acceptable. But aborting normal healthy babies that had been developed quite far already, was something vile. It was murder, and Donovan Cole was audaciously making profit out of it.

* * * * *

Daniel White's face turned from cheerful to dusky as he listened to Kyle's story about what Dr. Cole was doing with his spare time. He poured his glass almost full and lit one of his precious cubans, quietly muttering to himself before speaking.

"This is just sad," he said, blowing out a thick cloud of smoke.

"It is, sir, I'm sure Dr. Cole is a fine asset to this hospital, but—"

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"I wasn't talking about that," Dr. White interrupted him rudely. "I meant it's sad that you found out about his activities in the first place. I told him specifically to be careful." Dr. White leaned back in his chair, tasting the quality whiskey, rolling his tongue in it before swallowing.

Kyle could not believe his ears. Staring at Dr. White with his mouth partially open, he desperately tried to adapt to this new situation.

"So, you're actually supporting Dr. Cole's endeavours?" He asked, seeking confirmation for something that was already quite clear.

Dr. White sighed, leaning forward this time. "Do you know how many women Dr. Cole has saved?" He then asked.

"As far as I know, the woman I saw was in no danger - unless you consider his husband to be one."

Dr. White laughed. "I'm talking about options here, Kyle, and the options in this case were either to get help from a solid professional like Dr. Cole or an illegal abortionist, who might have severely damaged this woman, or something much worse."

Kyle saw where Dr. White was heading, but he could not accept the reasoning.

"That pregnancy was too far to be safely aborted, and in any case, abortions are illegal," Kyle snarled. "Dr. Cole is breaking the law."

"Okay, that's enough," the old doctor finally said tiredly. "Crawl back to your filthy little hole and just do your job, or I will make sure that once you graduate from the medical school, there won't be a single hospital or a healthcare facility willing to hire you in Missouri."

Kyle swallowed hard because he knew Dr. White was capable of doing that, but he could not ignore this matter. Without saying anything further, he stood up and walked towards the door.

"Have a great evening, and remember to study hard!" Dr. White yelled after him as the door closed behind Kyle's back. His arrogant mockery sliced deep into Kyle's soul as he dragged himself back down to the basement floor.

* * * * *

Hugh was curious to hear everything, but the news about White's reaction did not seem to bother him nearly as much as it did Kyle.

"Doctors often like to raise themselves above the law," he said, shrugging helplessly.

"I have to do something," Kyle snorted, then his eyes lit up as he glanced at Hugh.

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"Cole has a short day tomorrow again, so we know what he's most likely up to. This time I will take a camera!" He sounded more excited as the plan formed in his mind.

"Are you sure?" Hugh asked worriedly. "You are about to enter some really dangerous waters, my friend."

"I'm sure," Kyle assured. "I have to stop him, and a photograph serves that purpose perfectly!"

A thin smile was slowly twitching Kyle's lips upwards. "If I can't get Dr. White to do anything about this madness, then perhaps a little bad publicity in the newspaper will do the trick."

"You'll get fired," Hugh warned.

"Probably," he admitted, "but it will end the abortions, leaving me clean for a new job."

"Well, just be careful out there," the big man wished him, as it was clear there was no way to talk Kyle out of his plan.

"I will, Hugh, don't worry," Kyle said.

6.

The familiar Thunderbird was driving through the city, heading towards Holly Oaks, a residential area favored by the rich people. It was the first day with a below freezing temperature, so Kyle had to handle his car carefully. He did not want to end up testing the strength of the massive oaks growing on both sides of the road. A large camera was lying on the passenger seat, ready to capture a glimpse of Dr. Cole's dark hobby.

Many smaller private roads departed from the main one at regular intervals, leading up to the grand estates. Cole's Thunderbird turned to one of these roads, and Kyle's Chevy followed right on his tail. Knowing that these roads were not too long, Kyle began to look for a proper place to park well in advance. He would have to sneak through the frozen woods in order to reach his goal.

It turned out to be an extremely wise decision as the gate was guarded. The Chevy was waiting at a small forest clearing, hidden by the surrounding thickets. It was not more than a mile to the low stone fence that seemed to be surrounding the entire property. While climbing over the gate, Kyle glanced at every direction to make sure there were no guards around, and while he was doing that, he noticed Cole's car arriving in front of the main door of a house. Carefully he jumped to the ground, trying to make sure he would not break the camera or himself. Then he began to move towards the house, careful to remain out of sight.

Fortunately, the entire yard was full of trees from cedars to fully grown oaks that offered him plenty of cover to sneak all the way near the main building without being noticed. Once he made it close to the large windows at the front of the house, he was granted a pleasant surprise. Dr. Cole was going to perform the abortion in broad daylight right in front of the large windows! Apparently, they did not expect anyone to be sneaking outside, possibly looking inside and seeing what they were doing. Kyle was content with this situation as it gave him a really good angle to take a picture. Now he just had to stay low and wait for the right moment.

Only the lady of the house was in the room with Cole as he was preparing his table again. Kyle was hiding behind the thick rose bushes, holding his camera and watching as his breath turned misty in the cold air. Every once in a while, he peeked over the bushes to see how far they had progressed inside. Apparently, the father of this child could not be bothered to attend this little family event, when Cole would yank the baby out with his steel pliers.

Finally, everything was ready, and so was Kyle. Slowly standing up, using both hands to keep the camera steady. He saw Cole's head in between the woman's thighs, the whole view might

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have looked like some perverted game these people liked to play in their house, but Kyle knew better. It was a murder in progress, and he was going to make sure it would never happen again.

The photoflash went off in the grey afternoon, covering the entire room with a bright flash. Kyle was well aware of the distorting effect the glass might have, not to mention about the reflection. But he was hoping that the photo would be clear enough to show what was going on in that room.

Dr. Cole's frightened face looked up, and the woman was also trying to peek outside, but Kyle was already running away. He was quite sure they could not raise the alarm fast enough because of their rather awkward situation. The woman was probably under sedatives and strong painkillers, and thus unable to move very fast. Dr. Cole, however, ran after Kyle like a mad dog. It took him a while to get out of the house and reach the yard, and when he finally made it that far, Kyle was already climbing over the stone fence, disappearing into the woods.

Cole stopped and a thin smile appeared on his lips, he had recognized the intruder. Kyle would not get very far with this little trick.

Still smiling, Cole returned to the house. He had a task to be finished.

"Who the hell was that?" The woman insisted to know as soon as Cole stepped into the room.

"Someone who wants to ruin my practice," Cole said calmly. "Don't worry about him, I have everything under control."

"I sure hope so," the woman said coldly. "I'm paying you far too much for some trespasser to humiliate me publicly."

"That photo, if it really reveals anything as it was taken through the glass, will never show up." Cole assured, while getting back on his knees to continue his interrupted procedure.

* * * * *

A Chesterfield cigarette was burning fast between his lips as he drove back to Eastridge. His hands were a little shaky as he turned the radio on to calm down his nerves. Patti Page was singing her old hit song, "*With My Eyes Wide Open, I'm Dreaming*", but even that was not doing a very good job. Hoping that Cole had not recognized him - even though the chance for that was very slim - Kyle was rushing back to the Eastridge General, for he was late from work again. He would have to hide the camera somewhere safe and get the photograph developed the next day. Daniel White

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would have to take action, or he was going to send the photo alongside with a letter to the local newspaper, telling them everything he knew about the abortions Dr. Cole was performing in the area. The sensation caused by the revelation of doctors breaking the law would effectively decrease the chances for them to keep making money that way. Kyle preferred the plural because Dr. White's words gave him a strong reason to believe that Cole was not the only one capitalizing on women in distress.

The Chevrolet Fleetline sailed through the afternoon traffic. There was nothing he could have done to make it through any faster. The light snowfall had changed into cold rain, and the streets were turning downright devious until the ice would be gone.

The statues in front of the main building were looking at him, mocking him for the trouble he had gotten himself. A thin layer of frost was covering their marble clothes and the melting ice created watery tears flowing down from their eyes as Kyle passed them on his way to the lobby. Casting an angry glare at the statues, he opened the front door.

"If I were you, I wouldn't say a damn thing."

The cold furnace of the incinerator was waiting for him, just like on any other afternoon when he had unwillingly dragged himself down there.

Without wasting any time, Kyle headed to the side room, where he dropped the camera into the desk drawer. It was certainly not the best place to hide it, but Cole could not reach for it without passing him first.

Kyle followed his routine, until Hugh came for his first visit - a lot earlier than usual. He was curious to hear how the little stalking trip had went, and was happy to know how Kyle had nailed the villain. Ever optimistic Hugh was not going to even think about a chance that it might be just a photoflash all over the picture.

"Do you think we should be worried about Cole?" he asked.

Kyle shrugged nervously. "I don't know, he's a doctor," he pointed out the obvious. "He has a lot to lose, but I doubt I'm in a real danger," he added.

Picking on his beard, Hugh seemed thoughtful like he was about to say something, but then he sighed deeply. "Alright then," he said "I gotta continue my round, but I'll be back later. How about some poker on the break?"

Kyle smiled tiredly, "Sure thing, Hugh, see you later."

Keeping the truth from Hugh, Kyle was indeed a little worried about Cole. He was a doctor, but also a man who was going to lose a substantial amount of income once the ugly truth was

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revealed. Whether he would be ready to act upon it or not, was a veiled mystery until something would happen.

After making sure that the drawer was properly closed, Kyle poured himself some more coffee and sat down. Unfortunately, there was no chance to lock the drawer, but seriously, how long would a simple wooden drawer hold off anyone. There was a heavy iron shovel in the next room that could be easily used to break the drawer into pieces. No, a lock would not make it any safer than it already was.

7.

Not too long after Hugh had left with his daily load, the steel door leading to the incinerator room was kicked open, and furious Dr. Cole walked in carrying a small black bag in his right hand.

"Kyle Richards, what the hell do you think you're doing?" He roared without waiting, then he glared around in the empty hall, until Kyle came from the side room, walking calmly to meet him in the middle.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Cole," he said politely.

"Cut the bullshit," he snarled enraged, "I heard you snitched to Danny about what we are doing here. Are you too stupid to realize what huge favors we are doing to these poor women?" He continued yelling.

Kyle remained calm. He had not really expected anything less than an outburst like this. "I do realize that you are performing illegal abortions, and I'm going to make you stop," he declared modestly.

Cole laughed, almost hysterically. "You— You are nothing but a filthy janitor, if even that," he mocked, but then he paused for a moment, wrinkling his eyebrows thoughtfully. "But I'm willing to give you one more chance," he then said, breathing heavily. "Give me the film and keep your mouth shut about everything, and I will promise to forget this little incident."

Kyle actually smiled, and for a moment, Cole thought he would catch the bait, but then his smile died, replaced by revolting grimace.

"I would rather die than live with all those innocent souls on my conscience," he hissed. "The film will be developed and shown to Dr. White. If he fails to take action, then the photo will be sent to the Eastridge Ledger, and we will see how that affects your little hobby." Kyle was not going to budge an inch on this matter. The innocent souls thrown into the incinerator were demanding justice, and Kyle wanted to do everything he could to make sure they would get what they deserved - a peaceful rest - freedom from their purgatory.

While Kyle was speaking, Cole sneaked closer to the place where the crate used to stand overnight. The shovel was still standing against the wall. He dropped the bag on the floor accompanied by a disturbing thud.

"I was afraid you would stubbornly stand your ground," he growled, wrapping his fingers around the shovel rod.

Kyle was unsure what to do when he noticed Cole picking up the shovel. He was suddenly

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scared for his life as he realized that this man could go beyond reason to save his own hide. The suffocating fear of danger caused him chills, and he was able to hear his rapid pulse in his head.

Cole approached him with an icy stare in his eyes, holding the shovel tightly in his hands.

"What are you going to do, crazy man?" Kyle cried as he took a couple of steps back.

"What am I going to do?" Cole mocked him. "I'm going to teach you that a scumbag like you should learn your place and keep your dirty nose out of things that don't belong to you." he hissed. "Your daddy is not here to save you from the lesson I'm going to give." A cruel malicious grin flashed on his face.

Trying to grow distance between of him and the maddened doctor, Kyle was taking small steps back, but he knew there was no way out of this. He could run, but that would leave Cole all by himself, providing him all the time he needed to find the camera and destroy all the evidence there was about his crime. Kyle could not allow that.

Then, with a tiny twisted smile on his lips, Cole made his move, swinging the heavy shovel through the air, aiming at Kyle's head.

Kyle raised his arms in front of his face to protect himself from the impact, but the iron edge of the shovel found its way through, hitting him in the forehead and causing a deep bleeding laceration. Kyle fell down with thousands of black sparkles dancing before his eyes; blood dribbled down from his forehead into his eyes, making it even harder to see, thus he never saw the next hit coming before it was too late. This time Cole had plenty of time to gather all his strength behind the strike. Kyle saw the shovel coming down at him and there was nothing he could do to prevent it. Still disoriented from the first strike, he was only able to watch, and then his world turned pitch-black.

Cole watched as Kyle's body twitched on the floor before turning motionless. The last hit was strong enough to possibly cause a fractured skull, which would ensure to keep him out for a long time - long enough for Cole to snoop around for the film.

"Now, where would you hide the film?" He muttered quietly as he dropped the shovel to the floor, right next to Kyle's still body.

Cole headed towards the side room, which he thought was the best place to hide the film within such a small time frame.

Searching the cabinets thoroughly before moving on to the desk, Cole did not leave a single place without attention as he was absolutely certain that the film was somewhere in that room.

"Maybe I should just go back and kill that son of a bitch and throw the body into the

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furnace,” he groaned to himself, while continuing his work. He knew there would be consequences for killing the boy though, which made him a little wary about such ideas. A lot of uncomfortable questions would arise if the son of a famous surgeon in Springfield would suddenly disappear. Robert Richards was very influential man, and Donovan Cole, as good as he was, would never get even close. He needed to figure out something else instead of murder.

As he was reaching for the drawer under the desk, he heard something strange. A delicate sound of children singing an old nursery rhyme somewhere in the distance. Cole stood up and listened carefully. He was deep underground with tons of concrete around him. How on earth he was able to hear something like that? And yet, there it was, loud and clear.

*”As your bright and tiny spark,
Lights the traveller in the dark,
Though I know not what you are,
Twinkle, twinkle, little star.
Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!”*

Interrupting his search, Cole walked back to the incinerator room, completely unprepared for the sight that was waiting for him.

Between the cart and the hatch stood the circle of children, chanting that same abhorrent rhyme.

”What, in the name of God, is this?” he sighed loudly, but the oddly translucent figures paid no attention to him.

Cole was not sure what he was supposed to do now. The view in front of him was something he had never seen before. Feeling strangely drawn to these children, he continued approaching them, beginning to see some of the details. There were three girls and two boys in the circle, staring at each other like there was nothing outside of their ring. Their spotless and precocious clothes seemed smooth and clean, but their skin seemed unnaturally pale with deep dark circles around their eyes. Their facial features were extremely hard to describe as they seemed to be in constant vibrating motion. Their mouths, eyes, hairs, everything, glittered through the air in a strange mixture of lights and shadows.

The grey-haired doctor was curious and fascinated by this amazing vision, but at the same time his heart felt cold; strangled by an unspeakable fear. He did not see the connection between these fallacies and his own crimes, because if he did, the sheer fear would have crushed his

curiosity for this phenomenon.

Then they were gone; disappeared like the smoke of a cigarette vanishes in the wind. Without a sound, without a warning.

Cole stepped on to the rails where the children had been standing, but there was absolutely no trace of them to be seen. He chuckled to himself, doubtful of his own eyes. Maybe it was just an illusion caused by the stress of all the unexpected events lately. He really wanted to believe that, but then he heard it again; silent whispers right behind him, but this time it was not a rhyme. They were cold and slithering voices like a prowling snakes, and they called for Cole.

”Murderer!”

The whispers amplified into cutting shrieks, like multiple voices suddenly screaming inside of his head. He turned around and saw the children as they truly were: empty black eyes, scorched and blistered skin, distorted and partially melted eyes, pointing at him with their burned little fingers.

”Murderer!”

The power of the screams forced him to stagger backwards, trying desperately to get away from the terribly tormented figures. Leaning against the open hatch, he felt weakness in his legs, but he refused to give in to the devious blackout that was lurking right around the corner. He had this disturbing premonition that if he lost his conscience now, it would be the end of the road.

In the end, it did not make any difference from his standpoint. The breaks of the heavy cart behind the children were suddenly released, and the entire huge pile of iron began to roll towards Cole. It reached an unbelievably high speed in such a short distance; far higher than it would have been possible under normal conditions, but the day was far from normal as the suffering souls bestowed all of their caged wrath upon the man who was responsible for their deaths.

The cart slammed against Cole's body, forcefully pushing him inside the furnace. An immense pain struck through his body as he was crushed in between the back wall of the furnace and the steel cart. The snapping sound of breaking bones echoed in the hall, and the hopeless cry of the dying man got overlapped by the last mournful whisper as the morbid figures began to fade away.

”Murderer...”

Even though it was supposed to be impossible, the timer of the incinerator went on by itself as the black hatch was slammed shut by an unnaturally intense draft coming from nowhere, releasing the valves regulating the flow of propane and oxygen. Cole was weakened by the internal

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bleeding, but as he realized what was about to happen, he revived enough for a one last frantic struggle to free himself. But the battle was hopeless; there was no chance for pushing the cart out since the hatch was locked.

The timer ticked through the sequence, launching the electric arc that ignited the propane. Cole had a front row seat to watch as the exploding fireball instantly filled the furnace. Closing his eyes tightly to keep the sudden brightness away was helpful only for a second before the intense heat burned his eyelids away. He tried to scream, but his burning throat and lungs refused to respond. The pain he felt was horrid, but it did not last for more than a couple of seconds before it was over.

The ghostly children had vanished, leaving only the furiously burning incinerator behind. Kyle was still lying on the floor, moaning faintly as he was slowly regaining his consciousness. A terrible headache, like constantly pounding hammer, was penetrating through his foggy mind.

Then he heard a distant noise coming from the corridors, almost covered by the humming sound of the furnace, a dull echo indicating that Hugh was approaching with the second load of the day.

8.

Feeling like he was about to throw up, Kyle slowly raised his severely aching head from the cold concrete floor. His vision was still blurry, and he was barely able to see Hugh's worried face.

"Hey, how are you feeling?" he asked, helping Kyle to sit up by supporting him.

"My head hurts so badly," he moaned quietly, gazing at the incinerator.

The strongly humming sound of the flames inside the furnace had caught his attention as he was slowly becoming more aware of his surroundings.

"How long was I out?" he wondered.

Hugh shook his head at him, looking rather uncertain. "I have no idea, really, but it can't be more than two hours since I found you on the floor when I got back with the second load of the day."

Kyle stared at him for a moment, as if he had hard time to believe what Hugh had just said, before turning his eyes back to the machine. Hugh followed his glance and nodded.

"I was hoping you could tell me about that," he said, looking at the flaming furnace.

"I'm afraid I can't," Kyle said, groaning loudly as he tried to move, empowering the headache up to completely new heights.

"Cole came down here, demanding the film for himself. Obviously I refused, so he smacked me with a shovel," he explained, feeling around the thick lumps of dried blood on his forehead.

"Cole must have started the incinerator then; maybe he got rid of another body," Hugh presented his guess, but while he was still speaking, Kyle's eyes wandered down across the floor and saw the black bag still lying near the place where the scaffold usually stood.

"No," he said, "otherwise his latest victim wouldn't be still there."

Hugh glanced at the bag and shivered.

"Please, go to the other room and check if the camera and the film are still in the desk drawer," Kyle begged. He could not bear the thought of losing that piece of evidence.

"Sure thing," Hugh replied, laying his head carefully back on the concrete.

It did not take more than couple of minutes before Hugh came back, holding the camera firmly in his hands and smiling widely. "The film is still inside," he said.

"Oh, good!" Kyle sighed, feeling utterly relieved.

"Do you think Cole experienced the same fate as Morgan did?" Hugh asked suddenly, and Kyle had to admit the sharpness of Hugh's wit, even though Morgan had apparently committed

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suicide, unless of course, Cole had arranged his death. Now, however, everything strongly suggested that the children were responsible for Cole's death. The film was still there, the black bag was still lying against the wall, and Kyle had been knocked out, and yet, Cole had mysteriously disappeared while the incinerator had been turned on.

"They got their vengeance," Kyle whispered to himself so quietly that Hugh could not hear him.

After a few minutes, Kyle was strong enough to stand up on his own, but still needing help from Hugh to maintain his balance. They began their long journey out from the incinerator room in order to get some proper treatment for the vicious looking wounds on Kyle's head, knowing there would be a lot of questions ahead.

* * * * *

The cops could not figure out any kind of bulletproof reconstruction of the events that occurred on that day, and eventually, they ended up closing the case with a conclusion of an accident, where the incinerator suffered from a malfunction that caused the timer to go on by itself. They were never able to reproduce the faulty behavior, or explain how Donovan Cole ended up inside the furnace. Eventually, all charges were dropped, allowing Kyle and Hugh to continue working at their jobs. The incinerator was shortly replaced by a new one due to public pressure concerning general safety standards.

After the long winter, Kyle was finally able to seek out a new job in the field of medicine, and leave the janitor's position behind.

Daniel White suffered from a serious stroke in the next spring, and was forced to leave his position as the Chief of Staff. He did his best to make Kyle look guilty during the investigation, but the great amount of inconsistencies prevented any of his stories sticking too well. Besides, the one last remaining corpse of a baby found in the black bag made Dr. Cole undeniably their main suspect. Unfortunately, the incinerator worked perfectly, turning everything that was inserted to the furnace into grey powdery ash without a trace of what had been inside at the time of ignition. Whether Dr. Cole had died in the furnace, or escaped from Missouri without leaving any clues behind, remained as a mystery to the police as well as the press.

But Kyle knew the truth, and he would carry it in his heart for the rest of his life.

The children never appeared again, and the new janitor, who was hired after Kyle's contract

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ran out, was able to do his job without any problems. The restless spirits had found justice in death of their wrongdoer, and were finally able to rest peacefully.

Hugh took all the fun out of the experience by sharing the story with all the workers he encountered during the following years, and as a result of his lively language, the basement of Eastridge General is widely considered to be haunted even today - long after Hugh's retirement. It has become a famous inside ghost story that is often revisited during the night shifts - not just among the janitors, but nurses and doctors as well.

Nothing can spice up a coffee break like a good old scary tale.