

There's something in the darkness.



**MAPLE
SPRINGS**

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BY

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PROLOGUE

DAMPENED BY the night's light rain, Lucinda Mayweather's dress clung to her as she stood shivering in the dark doorway of the small barn. She crouched, feeling at her feet in search for the kerosene lantern she had recently extinguished. Finding the lantern, she quickly lit it and shone it before her, seeing only the solid back wall of the barn. The small earthy scented empty building used to keep hay in the winters was sealed tight except for the open door behind her, yet the strange looking pale man who had been there moments ago was nowhere to be seen.

It is as if he has magically disappeared into the darkness, thought Lucinda.

She still didn't know what sort of person the strange looking pale man was, but she didn't care. He had come to her with promises of power and strength, enhancing her natural abilities to take all the things that she wanted. In exchange she would use her gifts to get him what he fiercely craved.

It seemed simple as all she had to do was use skills she possessed to fulfill her side of the bargain, a smiling Lucinda thought. The deal had been struck and if he really could do the things he promised, she would finally get everything she ever wanted and more. That was all that mattered.

Maple Springs

Lucinda held the lantern high, lighting her way in the rain, humming a heavenly melody in a soft voice as she made her way back to her lover's house. She needed to gather her things and leave before he woke. She would take his horse, leaving him his new Model T, which she despised. She had to leave and quickly as the people of the tiny hamlet were becoming suspicious and she couldn't have that. Especially not now that she would be able to get whatever she wanted.

CHAPTER I

THE NOONDAY sun glaring on the police cruiser's windshield, Officer Cortez' almost didn't see Sandy Newman as she stepped off the sidewalk and into traffic.

"What the hell?" Officer Cortez shouted as she slammed the brakes, stopped the car, and got out, heart racing wildly from the near miss.

She pulled Sandy Newman out of the street and onto the sidewalk. From what she could tell, Sandy had lurched into the street to flag down her police cruiser.

Now Sandy rambled incoherently at first, or at least it had seemed so to Officer Cortez, who was still reeling from the near miss. After catching her breath, Officer Cortez composed herself but in the heat of the moment, her years of experience was replaced by bitterness and impatience.

"Calm down, ma'am and start from the beginning," Officer Cortez said in the least condescending tone she could muster to the mature lady before her. She pulled a small notepad and pen from her breast pocket, dabbed the tip of the pen to her tongue and readied herself to take notes.

"Sandy. My name is Sandy, not ma'am."

"Fine, Sandy," Cortez replied, trying not to display her annoyance with something like an eye roll. She had to remain professional. "This is your flower shop, isn't it?" Officer Cortez asked wanting to confirm what she already

knew. The sign above the storefront she faced read The Flower Shop, one of the least original business names Cortez had ever come across; she would later tell coworkers.

“Yes,” Sandy blurted while fidgeting, clearly still frazzled by whatever had inspired her to place herself in front of a moving vehicle.

“Okay. Take a deep breath and tell me again what happened.”

“Well I was coming back from the printer,” Sandy said gesturing in the direction of Repeat Printers. “I was ordering wedding invitations. My niece is getting married, you know.”

“Sandy, get to the point,” Officer Cortez said impatiently while trying to appear understanding.

“Well, this big mangy mutt came running at me. Scared the shit out of me,” Sandy stated while dabbing at the perspiration on her brow.

“You flagged me down for a dog?” Officer Cortez asked incredulously.

“A stray dog.”

Officer Cortez couldn’t hide the disbelief on her face. Sandy Newman, owner of The Flower Shop, had flagged her down for a dog. She jotted down a note about a stray dog.

A wide-eyed Sandy blurted the next part. “It had an arm in its mouth.”

“A what?” Officer Cortez’s face scrunched as she looked up from her notepad.

“An arm,” Sandy stated while nodding as if this was proof of what she had seen. “It was dead.”

“The dog?”

“The arm. I mean it was like old dead. Not like fresh dead.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Officer Cortez asked, lowering the

notepad. This required her full attention.

"It was all rotten and I think a few fingers were missing," Sandy said while shuddering. "Maybe the dog ate the fingers?"

"Look, Sandy. I'm sure it was just a branch," Cortez said dismissively while tucking the notepad and pen back into her pocket.

"It was an arm."

"A dead arm?" Cortez grinned. "Did you see which way the culprit went?"

A flustered Sandy pointed down toward the printing shop. "Down that way. Toward the printers."

"I'll look into it," Officer Cortez said in what she thought was a very convincing tone of voice. "But it's probably just a branch."

Sandy, obviously angry, pivoted and marched into her flower shop.

"Imagine that," Cortez mumbled. "A severed arm and its dead too," she said with a chuckle as she walked down the sidewalk. Half a block away, a large black cat casually strolled before Cortez. It sat on the sidewalk and made eye contact. Confused, Cortez stopped in her tracks and wondered why the cat seemed familiar to her.

She glanced back to see if Sandy was watching. She wasn't. Cortez turned again but the cat was gone.

"That was weird," Cortez said as she scanned the area for signs of a stray dog.

Later that night, near the Maple Springs Park entrance, teenager Robyn Skidmore stood under a flickering streetlamp amidst fluttering shadows. A gentle breeze messed her short dark hair while also rustling the leaves on the trees adding to the creepy darkness. The flickering

of the lamp suddenly stopped. Its illumination now faint, it cast weak shadows on this warm June evening. Shadows Robyn blended into, except for the light glinting off her studded belt. Her pale appearance enhanced by black pants and black Led Zeppelin T-shirt. In one hand, she held a shiny chrome staple gun and a black folder.

Robyn looked around nervously, recalling the old rumors of monsters and evil creatures lurking in Maple Springs Park. The gooseflesh on her arms that had been previously put there by the hoot of an owl was dissipating. But darkness made her imagination run wild as she glanced at the tree line not far from the cement curb at the edge of the road beside her. Shadows seemed to sway in the gentle breeze. The darkness made her anxiety bubble to the surface. Thick clouds covered the crescent moon and caused the shadows to blend with the deep black of night blurring where comfort ended and darkness began. Robyn's irrational fear of the dark, which had plagued her childhood, often returned in such moments. But it had never truly been the dark that scared her as much as what she imagined could be lurking in it.

Robyn took a deep breath and focused on the task at hand, calming her nyctophobia.

The lamppost was metal and so she couldn't use the staple gun. She would use the roll of packing tape she wore around her thin wrist like an oversized bracelet. In dealing with her anxiety, she had almost forgotten about it as it blended with her other bracelets. Tucking the staple gun into her studded belt, she pulled a page from the black folder and paused.

The page showed a picture of Sun-Yun, a young girl of Korean descent with shoulder length dark hair, a stunning smile and happiness in her eyes. And Robyn's best friend. It was a selfie taken in the very park that Robyn

was next too right now, during happier times. Robyn had tried not to believe the rumors about a monster in the park, but how else to explain the disappearances? A tear ran down Robyn's cheek as she checked if the poster had any spelling errors. She felt stupid for compulsively worrying about spelling. It was another one of her many quirks that her best friend would have teased her about. The word **MISSING** was written in a large black bold font at the top of the page followed by the question; have you seen this girl? The poster had Robyn's cell phone number on the bottom.

Sun-Yun Kim had been missing for over a week and it seemed like the townsfolk had brushed it off. After Robyn's persistence, the police spoke to Sun-Yun's parents and then insisted all was well.

How could they brush off their daughter being gone this long? They'd said that Sun-Yun had gone to visit family, but when Robyn had said the Sun-Yun wouldn't leave without telling her, texting her, her parents had said Sun-Yun didn't like Robyn anymore.

Robyn knew that was a lie. They'd been best friends since the first grade, even though all the other kids had shunned Robyn and made fun of her. Robyn hadn't fit in even back then. But Sun-Yun had sat with her at lunch. They had shared sandwiches on the very first day; Robyn's peanut butter and jelly, Sun-Yun's ham and green cabbage. Robyn was different but that had never mattered to Sun-Yun, even all those years ago. But now, with her childhood friend missing, those happy memories brought sadness instead.

Robyn palmed away a tear and proceeded to use the packing tape to hang the poster she had made. The poster up, she put the roll of tape back on her wrist and tucked the folder under her arm.

As she turned to walk away, a heavenly scent of lavender wafted to her, carried on the gentle breeze. Robyn lifted her chin and smelled at the air as if trying to capture all of the strangely intoxicating scent. The clicking sound of shoes on the sidewalk startled Robyn and she did something she would have never done as a child. She ran to the edge of the dark woods and hid in the shadows, not wanting to be seen out alone after dark.

The sudden quiet was overwhelming, the only sound her own breathing. In the quiet, even the crickets were waiting to see who was coming. Hard chills suddenly rocked Robyn's body as the realization of being in the complete dark engulfed her.

Robyn bit her lower lip hard, struggling not to scream as her fear of the dark gripped her. But in that moment, the scent of lavender intensified and this time it seemed overpowering. She felt her anxiety wash away as all she could think of was the scent and where it was coming from.

As the clicking of the shoes on the concrete came closer Robyn could now hear an angelic voice humming softly, a heavenly melody that had a soothing effect on Robyn. Her fear of the dark abated and a relaxed feeling overcame her. She contemplated stepping out from the shadows to greet the figure which appeared in the distance. Unsure why she would feel this way, Robyn shook the fog from her mind and decided to remain hidden as she watched the stranger approach.

Robyn couldn't help but sense a familiarity as she watched a beautiful mature woman with long, wavy blonde hair casually stroll into view. She had high cheekbones, a strong jaw line. She walked down the sidewalk as if all was right in her world. A pang of jealousy coursed through Robyn as she watched the carefree woman walk toward where she had been mere moments before. The

woman wore a long flowing beige skirt which had lacy ruffles at the bottom, with what looked like a light blue shirt as a top. The sleeves were rolled up to her forearms and the shirt's hem was tied at the waist with a large knot of blue fabric. She wore large gold hoop earrings that shone in the faint darkness as she strolled casually to the lamppost. The melody the enchanting woman hummed sounded strange yet welcoming. *She looks like a fortune teller from a carnival*, thought Robyn.

"Stevie Nicks," Robyn whispered before she realized she had said this aloud. She placed a hand over her own mouth as her eyes grew wide hoping the woman hadn't heard her. Stevie Nicks is what Robyn recalled her father saying about the women standing under the faint light of the lamppost. He had said she reminded him of the singer from Fleetwood Mac, only prettier if that was possible. A fact that her mother said was preposterous as Stevie was much-much prettier than this strange woman could ever be. Her mother had clearly been jealous.

The blonde who looked like a fortune teller reached out a hand and gently touched the picture on the poster as if caressing the young girl's cheek. The smell of lavender again felt overpowering as Robyn took her own hand away from her mouth and sniffed the air, breathing deeply. A renewed calming feeling swept over her as she watched the woman gently tear the poster off the lamppost. She examined it carefully before crumpling it into a ball and tossing it on the grass between the tree line and the cement curb. As the crumpled poster came to a stop, anger swelled up inside Robyn. The woman had cast Sun-Yun's poster aside as if she didn't care what had happened to her. She was like all the others, who didn't care about any of the other missing people of Maple Springs. Robyn started to rise, she wanted to throw the crumpled poster in

the woman's face. How dare she dismiss Sun-Yun like that! But every thought of confronting the woman was stifled as the blonde turned and stared in Robyn's direction.

Her serene appearance had been replaced by a stern expression as the woman glared in Robyn's direction with such intensity that gooseflesh appeared on Robyn's arms for a second time that night.

Unsure why, Robyn knew the woman wasn't looking at her but past her. Something else had caught her attention and that made Robyn want to scream. She bit her lower lip even harder as she watched, fear of the unknown tugging at her very soul. The women turned and began walking again although with less carelessness and more determination. As if now, she had somewhere to be, she walked off leaving the crumpled poster on the grass.

A large drop of rain hit Robyn's cheek as she stepped from under the canopy of trees that had concealed her. She wiped it away as she realized she was now shivering in fright. She looked at her shaking hands as she tried to steady herself. A sudden loud cracking noise came from the woods behind her, reigniting her fear of the unknown. She darted to the glow of the faint streetlamp and turned to see if whatever had made the sound had followed her. More drops of rain came as she realized the calming soft scent of lavender was now gone, replaced by her previous uneasy feeling. She stared into the dark woods in the same direction she thought the enchanting woman was probably looking and saw nothing at first. Then high in the trees a glitter of something caught her eye. Maybe ten feet off the ground two reddish lights sat in the tree. Unsure of what she was really seeing, she was about to dismiss them when they flickered out, then came back on. Like someone, something, had blinked. A bout of panic set in.

"Monsters aren't real!" Robyn shouted in frustration.

The glowing red lights faded away as the rain began. Unsure if what she had seen was her imagination playing tricks on her, Robyn turned and ran for home, propelled by a little extra zest as she couldn't get the idea that something had been watching her out of her thoughts.

A light crackling of brush came from where the girl had hidden, and a small dark silhouette appeared in the shadows. The small figure remained hidden as a large lumbering shape with glowing red eyes emerged from the brush yet clung to the shadows. The large creature took a long stride, reached a weirdly beast-like arm covered in stiff hairs into the faint glow of the streetlamp, scooped up the crumpled poster from the ground and quickly stepped back into the darkness of the trees. The small figure stepped backwards following the much larger thing vanishing into the dark park where it had previously concealed itself.

Moments later, in the stillness, the lamppost light began flickering again for a few moments and then burned out, letting the darkness win this night.

Having come in using the back door, Robyn crept up the stairs in the faint glow of nightlights. She had been caught in the sudden downpour just a few blocks from home, so now she left a trail of wet footprints and water droplets behind her. She walked as softly as she could, not wanting to wake her parents as she had no desire to explain being out this late. Her parents wouldn't understand. They had already begun talking about how Sun-Yun Kim had gone back to South Korea. A fact that was ridiculous because Sun-Yun wasn't born in South Korea. She was born right in Maple Springs, in the back of her

father's store because her mother had waited too long before going to the hospital. Her parents were originally from South Korea before immigrating. But that didn't stop people from saying that her best friend had gone back home, even when she argued and tried to explain that Maple Springs was her home. Robyn's mother had even said something about visiting family and had brushed it off during their last discussion. So even they wouldn't understand why she had made posters and had to put them up all over town. Someone had to know something, and she had to know what had happened to her best friend. Robyn simply couldn't accept the idea that her friend had vanished like the others.

Rumors were that others had disappeared as well. She'd heard these rumors since she could remember; tall tales of a Boogiemán who lived in Maple Springs Park or the one that came in the dark and stole people away. As a child, she never believed those stories, but they did make the dark a place she avoided at all costs. But now, years later when people started vanishing again, she couldn't get a straight answer from anyone about any of it. Robyn had pieced together through rumor and gossip that at least six others had vanished over the last few years. A few people said it wasn't that many; she was worried that it was more. Some talked about it being for a long time and some denied it all. Nobody seemed to know how many had really gone missing and the struggling Maple Springs Gazette's website was no help at all.

When she'd asked the local veterinarian, Robert Emerson, what happened to his wife, he shrugged and mumbled something about how she had finally gotten up the courage to leave him—something about her not being able to cope with all the animal hair. But when Robyn said he was crazy and that others were missing too, including

her best friend, he brushed her off like many of the others had done before him. And when Robert wasn't looking, Robyn put a poster up on the bulletin board of the veterinary clinic anyway.

Now, in the glow of the hallway's nightlight, creeping past her parent's closed bedroom door, she noticed the door of her brother's bedroom was ajar. Gently pushing it open and peering inside, she saw her little brother sleeping under a thick blanket. She crept into the dark room and stepped on one of the many action figures strewn about. She muttered a curse under her breath and dried her hand as much as she could before flicking on the nightlight above his dresser. She glanced back and saw dozens of action figures strewn about, some carelessly and some in carefully calculated positions. But now that she could see, Robyn carefully avoided the other action figures as she made her way to the door. At last count her little brother Duncan, whom she sometimes lovingly referred to as Skidmark, had over a hundred various sized action figures, his favorites being the cheap Chinese knockoffs of monsters and robots. He liked those best because they didn't have stories. He could use his imagination and come up with his own stories for them. His current favorite was in bed with him as he slept; a hybrid of a muscular horned ape with goat hooves and large monstrous fangs. She recalled Duncan was still working on the story for this one as he couldn't make up his mind whether it was good or evil.

Robyn often pretended she hated her little brother but that wasn't the case. She had loved him from the day her parents brought him home from the hospital. Perhaps even before that. But now the nine-year-old had become a friendless annoying brat. Robyn closed the door behind her and froze as she heard Duncan stir. Listening intense-

ly, she heard nothing else and so went to her own room to get out of her wet clothes. The rain had ruined all her posters, but she wasn't too worried as she could make more at her father's printing shop where she worked part time. She would have to do it when he wasn't there so he wouldn't say something stupid about her best friend going back to Korea again. She tossed her wet clothes in the hamper. Something she knew her mother hated but she did anyway.

Minutes later, Robyn was in bed, passed out from exhaustion while her parents slept soundly in their room. The nightlight in the upstairs hallway flickered but remained lit. The glow from underneath her brother's bedroom door flickered and went out. From underneath the same door, a red glow grew softly until it lit the floor of the hallway. The glow remained for a brief while and then faded away as quick as it had appeared leaving the hallway softly lit by the nightlight in the hall outlet.

CHAPTER 2

THE LONG beige skirt and blue shirt clung to the rain dampened Lucinda Mayweather as she walked along Main Street to the house with the white picket fence she called home. For years since coming to the Maple Springs area she had tried to remain under the radar. But people had always been drawn to her and she might as well use her charms and abilities to her benefit. So, she decided to relocate to a more prominent place in town where she would be able to get better access to more influential townfolk. This home on Main Street was perfect except it had previously been occupied by Leonard Legault, a legendary recluse with very little use for people. Lucinda had heard the rumors early on of how Leonard had had a way of getting under people's skin quite easily. And since the man was an enthusiastic taxidermist, the irony of people saying this was not lost on Lucinda Mayweather.

Rumors were that Leonard had money hidden in his home. Earnings he had squirreled away as an accountant for organized crime. But if you inquired many would tell you those were unfounded rumors. And since Leonard didn't hunt, he had to purchase the carcasses from locals for his hobby of making statues with dead things. But now people didn't bring him dead animals anymore as Leonard was sick. Bedridden. And Lucinda had moved in to help care for the aging recluse. Nobody really knew

how long she had been at Leonard's house. That was just as conflicting as the rest of the "facts" people knew, ever since Lucinda Mayweather came to town.

But now she walked with purpose, marching up the walkway of the blue and white trimmed, large two-story Victorian house. She walked past one of Leonard's creations, a stuffed deer posed on the front lawn. She stopped on the stoop next to a large stuffed grey squirrel perched on the veranda's railing and glanced at the way she had come, half expecting to see someone or something following her. She had sensed something strange but didn't know what. Something hidden in the woods of Maple Springs Park and whatever it was had been watching her. And while she sensed its presence, she couldn't tell what it was and this bothered her as she would normally have ways of sensing these things.

Satisfied that noting had followed her after all; she entered through the unlocked front door and was greeted with faint illumination and a muffled scream. The scream stopped and was replaced by faint sobs for help.

The house was softly lit as always with many antique fixtures, the thick dark curtains prevented any outside light from invading the home. Every square foot of Leonard's home had a decoration of sorts or something ornate to fill any potential voids. Antiquities, strange art and his works of taxidermy filled every corner, every space and every inch.

A stuffed owl, old and worn with age, sat near the front door and Lucinda gave it an affectionate pat. She unbuttoned the damp blue shirt, untied the knot at her waist and removed the garment revealing a torn silk camisole. Lucinda shuddered at the thought of how the blue shirt wasn't what she had been wearing when she left the house just hours ago. Her lover had been a tad overzealous in re-

moving her blouse, tearing it in the process. And while she had loved the frilly white blouse she had worn, her lover had more than made up for ruining it with his passionate lovemaking. Lucinda smiled as she hung the shirt on the rack of a large stuffed moose in the wide hallway. In the simple ruined camisole with her long skirt flowing, she walked past a stuffed coyote, running her fingers over the fur on its back.

Lucinda walked past a stuffed crow perched on a lit antique light fixture and stopped before a wide, old wooden door. As a fresh hoarse scream began, she slid the deadbolts open revealing a staircase descending into the dark basement. The damp smell of mildew mixed with the cloying sweetness of lavender wafted up the stairs as warm air caressed her skin. Lucinda smiled as she flicked on the light. The scream stopped abruptly as Lucinda descended into the abnormally warm basement. Antique imitation torch sconces cast a faint glow throwing as much shadows as it did light yet still illuminating the large room. The basement was littered with dried flowers, plus cloves of hanging garlic and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of dusty jars on wooden shelving that covered most of the walls. Where there weren't shelves, there were cabinets, leaving very little empty wall space anywhere. The jars contained strange looking liquids and jellies of various colors. Some contained Leonard's garden preserves while many contained dried herbs, plants and spices of sorts. A large jar contained various sized eyeballs that looked all too real. Another contained thousands of teeth, from different animals, though a few looked suspiciously human. A large wooden table with multicolored stains on its surface, sat in the center of the room. More shelves and cabinets had been built under the table, and these held a variety of tools and more jars.

"Hush, girl," Lucinda Mayweather said as she walked thought the room to the old metal cell against the back wall.

The young Korean girl from the poster sniffed at the air as she relaxed her grip on the metal bars. Sun-Yun Kim closed her eyes and pushed her face between bars and inhaled deeply, a sudden strong scent of vanilla filled her sinuses.

"I thought you would never come back," Sun-Yun mumbled as she became suddenly docile. She opened her eyes. "I was afraid."

"Don't be afraid, my child," Lucinda replied in a soothing tone.

"I'm sorry," Sun-Yun replied with much sincerity.

"I know," Lucinda whispered. "But I'm here now."

"Is it that time again?" Sun-Yun asked.

"Yes, my child. It's that time again."

"He scares me," Sun-Yun replied with downcast eyes, as if ashamed to be speaking ill of the one that Lucinda called on. "The man with the cold skin, there's something wrong with him."

"It's okay, my child," Lucinda replied. "He won't hurt you. But you have to do this for me, okay."

"Yes. For you...I understand."

"Do you, my sweet child? That's good." Lucinda reached through the bars and caressed Sun-Yun's hair making the young girl smile ever so slightly.

The ornate antique imitation torch sconce near the corner of the room flickered and went dark. Behind Lucinda, a man cloaked in darkness stepped out of the shadows. It was as if the shadows clung to him, refusing to let go, as he walked toward the cell that contained the young girl. Shadows dissipated and revealed a pale skinned man with graying hair. He wore a strange looking suit that might

have been the height of fashion in the late 1800's. His top hat matched the open breasted black suit, exposing a yellowing white ruffled shirt. The shadow man smiled, showing yellow, pointy teeth as he walked past Lucinda, stroking her cheek with a yellow fingernail as he did. Lucinda shivered at his touch. The shadow man walked through the bars of the cell as if they didn't exist.

"I was waiting for you," he croaked in a hoarse voice. "It's been a while since you called to me."

"I'm trying to make this one last," Lucinda replied. "People aren't as easily swayed anymore."

"Poor you," the shadow man said sarcastically, a thin smile exposing his yellow pointy teeth.

Sun-Yun grasped at the bars of the cell fiercely as she locked eyes with Lucinda, as if now begging for protection. Lucinda reached through the bars and grasped the young girl's chin in her hand and returned her gaze. She gently shushed Sun-Yun as she watched a tear run down the girl's cheek.

"I thought maybe you had finally changed your mind about our arrangement," the shadow man said with a coy smile.

"Never," Lucinda replied as she watched the shadow man brace himself behind Sun-Yun and place his cold hands on each side of the young girl's head. His long fingers touched at the front of the girl's face and his smile widened as he made eye contact with Lucinda.

Sun-Yun's eyes rolled upwards into her head, leaving only whites to be seen as her body stiffened. Her grip tightened on the bars, her knuckles whitened as she convulsed before the tenseness faded and her body relaxed. Her mouth opened and drool ran down her chin and dripped down her front to land on her filthy t-shirt.

The shadow man's smile widened even more as Lu-

cinda turned and walked away, leaving him to his feeding. She paused in the stairwell to glance at him before leaving the room and locking the basement door behind her.

Breakfast at the Skidmoore house always included a heaping helping of chaos. Gloria Skidmoore was already doing her first load of laundry of the day while griping about a certain someone putting wet clothes in the hamper, again. Tim Skidmoore was making his son his favorite blueberry pancakes; unsuccessfully trying to make fancy shapes which end up looking like Rorschach blotches. Nine-year-old Duncan sat at the kitchen table drawing a picture of his favorite action figure as it stood guard near the edge of his page. Robyn stared at her phone while eating dry toast and brewing a pot of coffee while griping about getting a Keurig like everyone else on the planet.

“Well everyone else can help fill up the landfills with their one serving coffee pods but not in this house,” Tim remarked as he flipped a pancake that was supposed to look like a giraffe but had an abstract look to it at this point, as if it was illustrated by a four-year-old.

“Unlike those people, we care about the environment,” Gloria added.

“All I said was that if we had one, I wouldn’t have to wait so long for a stupid coffee,” Robyn replied. “Besides... nobody complains about the single serve creamers or the sugar packets. Or those millions of little stir sticks people throw out after just one use.”

“Actually, those stir sticks are being banned in a lot of places, along with straws,” Gloria said from behind the laundry hamper.

“Cofffeeeeeee..... braiiiiins.... Err... I mean, coffeeeee,” Duncan mocked doing his best zombie impersonation as

he scribbled away on his drawing.

“Shut up, turd-brain,” Robyn replied setting down her phone to finally pour herself a cup.

“Robyn?” her father said.

“What? He’s being a shit head and I haven’t had my coffee yet because of this stupid antique machine you guys insist on using.”

“A shit head... ha!!” Duncan muttered with his typical immature grin.

Robyn’s phone binged, singling a missed call. A quick glance told her Thomas McDougal had called yet again. He probably just wanted to make fun of her. Those jocks types were like that and she dreaded talking to him. *I’ll call him back later*, she thought, *after coffee*, while taking her first sip of much needed patience inducing nectar.

“Duncan, be good,” Gloria added as she disappeared into the laundry room.

Tim flopped a pancake onto a plate and placed it front of his son, “Giraffe?”

“Roadkill giraffe,” Duncan replied with a scrunched nose as he reached for the ketchup.

Tim smiled at his son’s joke as he spoke. “You’re going to leave that thing here like we talked, Duncan.”

“Do I have to?” Duncan asked in the whiney voice his sister despised.

“Mrs. Litney at daycare asked that you leave it home,” Gloria added as she emerged from the laundry room. “She said it scared some of the younger kids.” She was referring to Duncan’s favorite action figure, the hybrid muscular horned ape with goat hooves and large monstrous fangs.

“Why do I even have to go to daycare anyway,” Duncan complained.

“Because Dad has a business to run, Robyn is doing deliveries for him this summer and the last time I took

you to work with me was a disaster,” Gloria said in frustration as she poured herself a coffee. She often brought this up, never letting the boy forget his Home Alone style rampage in the back room of the Thrifty Dollar Store she managed.

“And you’re still too young and immature to be alone,” Robyn added with a smile she hid behind her steaming cup. She glanced at her father and saw a look that meant; *don’t goad your brother*. Something she ignored, not wanting to argue about her best friend going back to Korea. A conversation that would be incredibly depressing.

Robyn’s phone rang again and this time she answered.

“Not now,” she barked and ended the call. Thomas McDougal could wait to try and be funny.