





**TOM CLEARLAKE**

**THE  
ESSENCE  
OF  
DARKNESS**

Translated from French  
by  
Beth Smith & Lynn E. Palermo

**MOONLIGHT**

The Essence of Darkness  
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*To Jean, Helen and Denis.*



“We should remember how repulsive our carnivorous habits would seem to an intelligent rabbit.”

H. G. Wells



The windshield wipers beat out a frenzied rhythm in the downpour pounding the vehicle. In the distance, the first hints of light from St. Marys started to twinkle through the glass, behind the streaming raindrops.

The call from headquarters pulled him from his thoughts.

“Agent Elliott Cooper?”

“That’s me.”

“You’re going to take a right at the next intersection; then keep going straight. The meeting place will show up on your GPS shortly.”

Cooper had to slow down almost to the point of stopping. The wind gusts were powerful enough to shake the huge, white, unmarked Chevy SUV they’d assigned him for the mission. He turned when he reached the intersection, leaving behind the motels on the edge of town. The blinking neon signs disappeared in the rearview mirror one by one, and along with them, any comfort he might have enjoyed after his long drive.

The signal that appeared on the GPS screen showed an isolated spot in the vast expanse of forest surrounding the town of St. Marys, Pennsylvania.

He followed the indicated route, which twisted through five miles of rain-battered valleys. Then he left the road to take a muddy track that plunged into the woods. The wheels got stuck in the mud several times. He drove

slowly and had to stick his head out the window so he could see where he was going.

He hated rain.

That was typical for an agent who specialized in field operations. After twelve years of good, loyal service in federal intelligence, Cooper expected a little clemency from the sky. But he often had the impression that the clouds only chose to open up over the countryside when he was starting one of his stakeouts.

He arrived at the meeting place and drove past the vehicle of the agent he was supposed to meet. He parked the four-by-four on the edge of the flooded track, pulled on his boots and raincoat, and joined the man waiting for him under an umbrella. Although he thought his face looked familiar, this agent turned out to be a complete stranger.

"I guess we can say punctuality isn't your strong suit," said the agent.

They shook hands formally.

"Have you seen the weather?" Cooper responded.

"Yes. I've seen the weather," the other replied coldly.

The man studied Cooper unblinkingly for a fraction of a second. Behind his fogged-up glasses, his eyes showed a certain impatience. Cooper didn't have time to analyze his features in more detail. He was young—in his thirties, max—and a bit pudgy. No doubt he spent a lot of time sitting behind a desk.

"Let's take shelter. I have some documents for you," the agent said.

Cooper followed him to his vehicle, another Chevrolet Suburban, also white, also unmarked. The FBI wasn't exactly original on that front.

Once inside, the man meticulously wiped off his glasses and took a black plastic folder with the federal service seal out of the glove box.

"Here's the complete, updated file. I'll let you look it over later. They must have told you about the nature of your mission."

"Yes. I have everything I need," Cooper replied, quickly flipping through the folder's contents. "I see more or less what's in store for me, Agent . . . ?"

"Agent Reynolds."

"Great. I won't keep you any longer, Agent Reynolds. You must have a long drive ahead of you." He closed the folder and slipped it under his raincoat.

"Yeah, I'm going back to New York."

Cooper waved good-bye and opened the door to get out of the vehicle. "Drive carefully, Reynolds. They said the storm was headed in the direction you're going."

"I'll spend the night in a motel if it gets bad."

"Have a good trip."

"Thanks. Good luck to you, Agent Cooper."

Cooper closed the door and went back to his vehicle.

The already-dark sky grew even darker with the fading daylight. The moon appeared briefly between huge, fast-moving puffs of clouds. Its pale glow passed over the woods for a few seconds and then disappeared again into the growing darkness. The tall, silent trees were desperately flailing their branches in the icy wind. If he could speak their language, he thought, maybe they would tell him about the chilling events they had witnessed.

Over the past five months, a series of horrifying events had struck the peaceful town of St. Marys. There had been several unexplained disappearances, a total of five, one after the other. The small town—home to twelve thousand souls—had fallen into despair. The people of St. Marys might have rationally accepted these tragic events if they hadn't involved young children. All the victims had been

between three and five years old. The most sordid rumors had spread in response to the police's silence. Captain Sherman's investigations had produced nothing—not a single clue. Even though they hadn't used the term "abduction" officially, these consecutive disappearances couldn't be coincidences. In the past three weeks, the FBI had taken over for the police and had taken charge of the investigation.

He turned on the heater, leaned the passenger seat back, and settled in as comfortably as he could. He took the time to pour himself a cup of coffee, at least what remained at the bottom of his thermos. He thought about getting his stove from the trunk but changed his mind, deciding the coffee was still warm enough to drink. The first pages of the file he had skimmed suffused his thoughts.

*On June 9 of this year, 2017, Mrs. Madeline Jones was visiting her friend Abigail Harris for the afternoon. With Mrs. Jones was her son Ryan, three years and five months old.*

*Mrs. Harris's two daughters, ages twelve and fourteen, were responsible for watching little Ryan. They were playing together in the enclosed garden of the Harris residence. It was a sunny afternoon. The two mothers were discussing schooling over a cup of tea on the patio, not far from where the three children were playing. At about 3:30 p.m., Mrs. Jones saw the two girls run past the patio. She looked for her son but didn't see him in the area. Interrupting the discussion with her friend, she stood up to ask the girls where her little boy was. They answered cheerfully that they were playing hide and seek.*

But they never found little Ryan.

Cooper raised his mug to his lips. The coffee was ice cold now. He set it mechanically in the cup holder without drinking and returned to his reading.

*On June 20, the childcare workers at the Maurus Street daycare center organized a “flower-picking afternoon” in the surrounding fields. When they returned to the center at 4:30 p.m., five-year-old Iris Winkler was missing.*

*On July 6 around 10 a.m., Sean Watson, age thirty-eight, parked his pickup truck in the parking lot of Dave’s Saw Shop. He entered the tool shop where he had left his lawnmower for repair. When Watson came out of the shop eight minutes later, his four-year-old son Jaden was no longer in the vehicle.*

*Sean Watson couldn’t contain himself after reporting his son’s disappearance. Within an hour of the incident, he had contacted the parents of the other missing children and formed a group of almost a hundred residents determined to act. Under pressure from the parents, Captain Sherman immediately organized a search that took place the same day. It involved nearly eight hundred people, including police officers and firefighters.*

Forty-eight hours later, the operation had covered a ten-mile radius around the city. Yet the search had been in vain.

*On August 18 at precisely 3:22 a.m., Cassandra Elmer, in an obvious state of panic, walked through the door of the police station in St. Marys, accompanied by her husband. She stated that a scream had jolted her awake during the night. Her young son Christopher, four years and eight months old, had been crying out for her. When she ran to his room on the second floor of the house, the window was wide*

*open, and the child was no longer in his bed—or anywhere else.*

According to the report, Captain Sherman himself had recorded Cassandra Elmer's statement after a call had dragged him out of his sleep. The events at the Elmer house that night could only confirm the theory of abductions. Now the police had to take care not to panic the population of St. Marys even more. The growing unease had threatened to cause unrest that the captain and his men would have had difficulty managing. At dawn, the captain once again had mobilized all his personnel for a second major search. This one had brought together 1,728 volunteers.

Once again, the search had found no children.

The rain had started beating down again. The drops were hammering the Chevrolet's sheet metal non-stop. He wrapped his raincoat around him and went out to get the stove from the trunk. He needed more coffee—hot, this time.

It was going to be a long night.

Cooper liked the beginning of investigations, the feeling of plunging into the unknown, into an uncertain place, where the slightest element could be interpreted... ground zero—where everything had started and from which one had to reconstruct everything. Then, on this improbable stage, based on uncertain deductions, the first tangible clues emerged, like actors coming out of the shadows, in turn, to give a silent, fragmented interpretation of the reality of the facts.

Protagonists cut from a funereal pantomime.

Then, these elements had to be handled with the utmost skill and care, without leaving out the slightest connection or similarity that could bind them.

Cooper had become an expert at this game. He had perfectly mastered the art of the hidden storyline. This buried reality smelled so strongly of terror and death that sooner or later it had to come to the surface, like a bluish, bloated corpse. Time could do that. Time could solve all mysteries. But the investigator was there to speed up time.

Captain Sherman's men had done their best to uncover elements that would have turned these disappearances into abductions. But although this seemed obvious to everyone, nothing, absolutely no tangible evidence, confirmed this hypothesis.

The delicious scent of the Aguadas he had brewed filled Cooper's vehicle. He settled into the seat again and sipped his coffee while he turned the information he had just learned over and over in his mind.

At this stage of the investigation, these disappearances were still disappearances. But the facts spoke for themselves. It was technically possible to approach each case separately from the others, as if there were no connection between them. But this investigative process only served to prove the eventual existence of an obvious link. Some agents in these types of cases approached the investigation systematically using this process. If Cooper found himself more than six miles from St. Marys, at the heart of these forests, in an end-of-the-world downpour, it was for a specific reason.

One item in the file had been confidential until then.

Lying on the passenger seat, the opaque plastic folder Agent Reynolds had just given him contained a sealed envelope awaiting his perusal. He finished sipping his coffee, set down the mug, and savoring the moment, unsealed the envelope to read its contents.

*On September 27, following the first four disappearances, Garrett Pearson, his wife Kaitlyn, and their five-year-old son Timothy went to Mrs. Pearson's parents' house for dinner. The house was to the north of town. Around 10:00 p.m., the family meal ended, and the Pearsons got into their vehicle to return home.*

*At 11:40 p.m., a driver called the fire department: a vehicle was on fire along North Fork Road. When they arrived, emergency services could only confirm the deaths of the vehicle's occupants. Upon notification, the police immediately contacted the FBI, which sent several agents to the scene. The scientific team removed two charred bodies from the smoking wreckage. Thanks to the vehicle's registration number, they identified Garrett Pearson, thirty-five, a bank employee in St. Marys, and Kaitlyn Pearson, twenty-nine, a stay-at-home mother. The civil registry listed them as the father and mother of a young child. Less than thirty minutes later, Timothy's grandparents, informed of the tragedy, confirmed that their grandson had left in the car with his father and mother after the family dinner.*

*However, responders only found the bodies of Garrett and Kaitlyn Pearson in the burned vehicle.*

The next question to answer was under what circumstances little Timothy had managed to leave the vehicle. The first theory was that the force of the accident could have ejected the child from the car.

After leaving the road, the car had ended up against a tree below the road. The right front of the Lexus was indeed crumpled. However, an agent noticed immediately that the impact was not what one might expect on a vehicle that had run off the road that way. The damage to the front of the car was minor and indicated a reduced speed when the vehicle struck the tree. The officer also deduced

that the force of the impact had therefore not been strong enough to sever the fuel system and ignite the automobile.

The analysis of the remains of the Lexus soon confirmed these deductions.

Cooper let the SUV's sway in the wind lull him for a few moments. The rain had stopped for the time being. Lightning continued to flash in the distance, behind the hills. Its rumbling reached his ears after several long seconds, muffled, as if the storm were now contained in a small cotton-filled box.

The report noted the Pearsons' vehicle doors had still been locked, and none of the windows had been broken. So that eliminated the possibility that the car had ejected the child. It was still possible that he had gotten out of the car after the crash, just before it caught fire, and wandered around in a state of shock until he'd gotten lost in the woods.

But in that case, why hadn't Garett and Kaitlyn Pearson left the vehicle too? Could the violence of the impact have caused them to lose consciousness? No—the impact had been minimal. In addition, responders had found both in their seats with their seat belts fastened. No airbags had deployed.

Twenty-four hours after extraction of the two charred bodies, the forensic analysis department issued its autopsy report. The Pearson deaths were not due to the fire in their car, and their respiratory systems showed no contractions asphyxiation could have caused.

Their hearts had stopped beating before the fire had destroyed the vehicle.

That could mean only one thing: someone had staged this accident. Someone, or several people, had

deliberately caused the deaths of Garrett and Kaitlyn Pearson. And someone had taken the child away before setting the car on fire.

Forensic technicians had found footprints around the Lexus, but it had been difficult for them to distinguish suspicious footprints from those of the emergency personnel who had arrived on the scene before the FBI. The heavy rains that had fallen that night had made it impossible to use dogs. Analyses showed that the prints were probably those of three people of average build. One set of footprints had vanished into the woods, heading north. There was no doubt that Timothy Pearson's abduction was linked to those that had taken place in St. Marys.

The beginning of this investigation gave off an unspeakable evil that Agent Cooper felt viscerally, despite all his experience. It was an uncomfortable sensation, one he wasn't used to feeling. Barely repressing a deep hatred, he immediately flipped to the next page, as if to dispel the chilling question of the killers' motive.

"Fucking psychopaths," he mumbled through gritted teeth.

The last document in the file was a map, something very familiar to him. The satellite photo included a thirty-mile radius around St. Marys. The northern part of the circle, an area entirely covered by forests, was highlighted in red. He was going to have to operate in this sector.

The last page concluded by listing his mission objectives:

1. strategic surveillance of the area,
2. sample collection,
3. detection and reporting of any human activity in the area,
4. the search, intervention, and questioning of any person who might be involved, and

5. neutralization if necessary.

He briefly scanned the text and closed the file.

He knew exactly what he had to do.

If his superiors had assigned him this case, it was because he was one of the best-qualified agents for this type of work—one of the FBI's finest bloodhounds.

And if they had made him responsible for operating in this area, it was unquestionably because they were convinced that the individuals who had participated in the St. Marys abductions were still hiding somewhere in these forests.

Nothing had predestined Elliott Cooper for his career as an FBI agent. He'd had a peaceful childhood on a small farm near Shelton, in northern Oregon.

When he was little, he spent most of his time in the hills with his father, who ran the family logging business. Elliott wasn't really interested in learning the rough job of a lumberjack, but he loved spending his days in the woods, chasing butterflies and smelling the flowers. It gave him a sense of freedom that lifted his young spirit as high as it could go. Every sort of encounter was possible in the woods. Strange insects buzzed around. Stray dogs chased him or played with him. Birds sang their songs without worrying about the cacophony all their improvisations created. He could smell the powerful fragrance of humus and taste the berries he picked and ate on the spot at any time. Wasn't life just an uninterrupted series of wonderful discoveries and intoxicating sensations? During his early years, little Elliott had the good luck to experience many extraordinary adventures. But when it was time to fill his notebooks and stay cooped up for hours in the classrooms of Mountain View School, things were different. Elliott was an intelligent but distracted child. He couldn't sit still for more than two minutes. The exuberant energy that enlivened him made it difficult for his parents to educate him. So when Elliott turned fourteen, his father, seeing that he wouldn't be able to interest him in working in the family business, decided to send him to a boarding school in Portland.

During each of his field missions, he once again felt that sense of freedom from his childhood, at least the freedom he'd known before boarding school.

Agent Cooper usually worked alone. His superiors let him choose to conduct his investigations as he saw fit. He was free to use the investigative methods he considered most appropriate. Of course, he'd had to prove himself to reach that point. Like all special agents, his training had been extremely challenging, both physically and psychologically. He still carried the painful memory of a survival training course in Afghanistan that he almost hadn't finished.

Cooper was thirty-eight years old. He was in perfect physical condition. He went for a run right after he got up every morning and finished each day with a yoga session. He didn't smoke, he drank nothing stronger than mineral water or coffee, and he ate only organic products. He lived alone. Well, almost alone: a cat named Clarence shared his loft apartment in St. Johns, the working-class neighborhood of Portland. He'd found Clarence one rainy night, in the alley just outside his front door. The kitten—starving and almost frozen to death—had been letting out small, high-pitched squeaks. Cooper had adopted the cat, even though he'd smelled like an old mop. When Cooper was away on a mission, the cat ate from an automatic dry food dispenser—filled with salmon, his favorite flavor—that Cooper had made by hand. For water, the cat crept along the beam that ran across the loft to a small flap that opened out onto the roof. There, Cooper had made a rain-water collector that provided Clarence with a continuous supply of water.

\*

*October 2*

The day's first ray of light awoke Cooper. A tentative dawn was breaking. The previous night's storm seemed to hang above a layer of clouds that weighed heavily on the woods. He had only slept four hours at most. The advantage of these SUVs was that you could actually sleep relatively well in them. He made himself some coffee and began planning his first excursion.

Northern Pennsylvania is just one immense forest. Human's presence is almost foreign, improbable, and he must face nature in its most brutal form.

No homes appeared on the map. The area Cooper was responsible for was fifty miles long and thirty miles wide. He had the support of a surveillance satellite with a camera pointed at the area continuously. An agent was available at all times to inform him of any suspicious movement. He highlighted points potentially usable for clandestine activities in red: rivers for water, rocky areas with crevices that could provide shelter, and the proximity of cultivated fields or herds of livestock. He circled the five forest ranger huts where he would sleep and store his equipment.

He would spend as much time in these forests as it would take to solve the case. It could go on for months. Usually, individuals involved in these types of crimes made mistakes sooner or later. They couldn't hide indefinitely without revealing some flaws. Cooper knew how to wait. He knew how to observe methodically with the patience of a predator. The slightest trace of their passage, the most imperceptible sign of their presence, and he would swoop in on them. Eliott Cooper didn't carry any form of animality within him. He was a calm and discreet man in everyday life. He was the polite, accommodating neighbor who helped old ladies cross the street and never

failed to greet neighbors with a smile. The FBI's training included good conduct and behavior beyond reproach in every respect.

Although he was nearly forty, Cooper had a strangely youthful appearance. The women of St. Johns nicknamed him "Mr. Cookies," an allusion to the old St. Lombard Street cookie factory in which he had built his loft. Most of the ladies in the neighborhood would have liked to take a bite. Others thought it was suspicious to see him alone all the time, without a girlfriend. Cooper was a good-looking guy: dark-haired, fairly tall, and slender. He had an angel's face with serious eyes, topped off with a slight, no-nonsense smile. Always impeccable, very pleasant, but not talkative. Mysterious. He sparked a curiosity tinged with mistrust. Mr. Cookies was too good to be true.

He didn't hang out anywhere at night besides the local supermarket, which was open twenty-four hours a day. From time to time, he would go there to stock up on cleaning products, milk, and cat food. People sometimes saw him slip into his van, a dark blue Pontiac Montana Sport, and hit the road. Cooper was, as they say, a guy who didn't make waves. Sometimes he had formal but friendly conversations with locals who wanted to talk to him. But even though Cooper played the neighborhood-relations game, it was easy to see that it wasn't his cup of tea. He was a diehard loner. Between missions, he spent his days off fishing north of Portland at Rimrock Lake. He often spent several days there accompanied by Clarence, who, with great delight, got to stuff himself with fresh fish until his stomach was about to burst.

Cooper deeply loved nature and the simple, pure sense of happiness that these moments brought him. Sometimes he expressed his thoughts out loud to Clarence. "You see, Cat, if all men were cats like you, things would be much

easier on our good old planet. Of course, there wouldn't be as many fish in the lakes." He had recently had a brief relationship with Barbara, a girl from the forensics department. She was sophisticated but also kind of eccentric. She was an intern. They had met during business hours over a small pile of meat on an autopsy table: what had been left of one of Slash Williamson's victims.<sup>1</sup> They had laughed a lot and eaten dinner right there: sushi, of course. A few days later, their relationship had deteriorated. Cooper made her come, but he couldn't satisfy her intellectually afterward. She was fond of pillow philosophy, and he wasn't very talkative even before making love. One morning, she had slammed the loft door behind her and disappeared. He had called her out of curiosity a few days later. She'd replied that she was tired of his silence and that her corpses were better company than he was.

\*

He made his backpack and got going. The sky was still overcast, but so much rain had fallen, it was very unlikely that the storm would return. The path wound through the trees and disappeared under dead tree trunks and a carpet of moss. The dampness added to the bitter cold of the dawn. The scent of the woods that filled his lungs was intoxicating, and he relished it.

Cooper was in his element. He had grown up in the woods. He knew how to listen to the birds and animals and understood their language. He could feel the flow of life, unaltered by man since the dawn of time. Here, there were no obstacles to the proliferation of species, no real limits to this primitive social symbiosis. Life, death, and

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<sup>1</sup> This serial killer's specialty was using a meat grinder to hide his victims' bodies in dog food cans.

justice were notions that didn't exist for the inhabitants of this place. They survived or they died, and they didn't ask themselves all the questions that haunt man.

The path led up to a large, shaded clearing with a log cabin in the middle. Daylight could hardly penetrate the thick growth of the woods. Cooper took a rusty key out of his pocket; it was a passkey from the forestry service. The cabin seemed to be in good condition from the outside, but he preferred to look inside before forming an opinion. He climbed the old pine steps that creaked under his weight, inserted the key in the lock, and managed to unlock the door with no problem. Methodically, his eyes swept the two hundred square feet of the only room in the house. Clearly, no one had been here for months, judging from the network of cobwebs that covered the walls. But the cabin had all the essentials: cut wood, a cast-iron stove, running water, and a rustic but comfortable bed.

He ditched his backpack and sat down on a wooden chair. His shoulders were burning after his four-hour hike. He sat for a few minutes, deep in thought.

Somewhere in these woods, those children might still be alive. Their captors could be keeping them locked up, fed, and cared for like young plants kept from wilting. He couldn't stop thinking about them. Abduction traumas remained engraved in victims' memories, especially when they were so young and vulnerable.

It reminded him of a case he had worked on for his exams at the FBI Academy: that of an eight-year-old girl, Erin Sullivan. The child had disappeared from an amusement park in Santa Monica one summer afternoon, even though her nanny had accompanied her. An abduction had been more than likely, as no body had turned up on the seawalls surrounding the park, which was right on the ocean. After over a year with no clues found, investigators had

exhausted all possible leads. They'd closed the investigation. Fourteen years later, the Los Angeles Police Department headquarters had received an emergency call: the informant had heard several shots on a street in a normally quiet residential neighborhood. When the police forces had entered the house the witness had indicated, they'd found the bullet-ridden body of a fifty-eight-year-old man lying in a pool of blood on the kitchen floor. A young woman had been lying face down under a table, gripping a .45 AutoMag Smith & Wesson in her hand.

That twenty-two-year-old woman had been none other than Erin Sullivan, kidnapped fourteen years earlier by the man she had just shot. It had taken psychologists and medical specialists over two weeks to get her to say a few words. She had then fallen back into silence and retreated into the reality she had invented to keep herself together during all those years of captivity. The psychopath who had abducted her had brainwashed her with tranquilizers and intensive confinement. He had managed to convince her that he was her father and that all the atrocities he inflicted on her on a daily basis were a normal part of family life. The flash of lucidity Erin Sullivan had experienced when she had grabbed his weapon to kill him had lasted only a few seconds, according to psychiatrists. For the next twenty years, she'd continued to evoke the memory of this monster with tears in her eyes, until she had taken her own life in a room at Rosemead Psychiatric Hospital in Los Angeles.

Cooper got up and went to fill the stove with logs, less to warm himself than to chase away the darkness engulfing him. Whenever his feelings took over, he quickly reminded himself that hatred and all other emotional impulses were obstacles to clear thinking. He had to keep his

mind free of any obstruction. Now he needed to act quickly and efficiently. With each passing hour, the chances of finding the children safe and sound were diminishing.

He rinsed a pan under the ice-cold, sputtering tap water so he could cook some rice.

One question had haunted him since he had reviewed the file last night. This thought had followed him all along his journey, like a silent shadow: the Pearsons had turned up dead and burned in their vehicle, and the people who had staged the accident had kidnapped Timothy. But nothing could establish the exact circumstances of the murder.

Their deaths had remained unexplained.

The investigators had focused on Timothy's disappearance because that was the priority. Timothy was the only lead to follow—the only lead that could take them to the other children.

Cooper poured the rice into the pan bubbling over the fire and pulled off his sweater. He went to crack open one of the two dormer windows to clear the steam out of the cabin. He drained the rice, grabbed a skillet, and threw in the onions he had just chopped. Then he broke three eggs into a bowl and stirred them. He was cooking mechanically without really being there. The question of the Pearsons' death kept coming back to him.

It wasn't his job to answer it. His mission was to find the children, alive if possible, and to prevent the kidnappers from doing more harm. But something else about this question was bothering him more than usual. He knew himself perfectly well. He knew he wouldn't get any sleep if he didn't find the answer.

He set the skillet aside, with the omelet still crackling in it, and went to get his cell phone from his backpack. His

finger swept down the list of business contacts and quickly found the one who would be best able to fill him in. He placed the secure call.

“Hey, Cooper; it’s been a while!”

It was his old buddy Matt, who worked at FBI headquarters.

“Hey, Matt; everything okay with you?”

“Everything’s good. You owe me twenty bucks on the last Bears game.”

“Ha ha! You never miss a thing,” Cooper joked.

“Nope. I’m a guiding light, buddy.”

“Duly noted. Listen, I’m calling you about something serious. Does St. Marys mean anything to you?”

“I saw the file go through—Pennsylvania, several child abductions. It’s awful,” Matt replied.

“Really grim.”

“Are you working on the case?”

“Yeah.”

“How can I help you, bro?”

“Do you still have access to the central file?” Cooper asked.

“Let’s just say I can answer a lot of questions on a lot of different subjects.”

“There’s one point I want to clear up.”

“Hold on. I’m opening the file,” Matt said, placing the phone on his desk

A few seconds passed.

“Here it is. I’m listening. Tell me what’s on your mind.”

“The St. Marys investigation is divided into five separate disappearance cases,” said Cooper. “Go to the last case, dated September 27.”

“Here it is. Timothy Pearson, reported missing by our services at 12:38 a.m. Both his parents died in the accident that occurred at approximately 10:30 p.m. Their vehicle

went off the road and hit a tree before catching fire, et cetera.”

“Okay, now go to the autopsy report the forensics team submitted on the bodies of Garrett and Kaitlyn Pearson.”

“I’m there. What are you getting at, Cooper?”

“Tell me word for word what it says in the conclusion of that report, Matt.”

“It’s just a technical report, no frills.” He read it:

The bodies’ advanced state of calcination does not allow for reliable analysis. Level of uncertainty estimated at eighty percent. The two DNA fingerprints are no longer readable, erased by combustion.

Cannot establish cause of death. No thoracic contraction and no ante-mortem lung lesions, therefore, no asphyxia. Cardiac arrest occurred prior to vehicle burning.

Hypothesis of probable causes of death for both victims: intravenous injection (or forced ingestion) of a lethal neurotoxin. Again, impossible to identify the neurotoxin due to combustion. Subject to validation and pending the documents of the appended file classified 5d.

“An appended file?” Cooper asked in surprise.

“Yes, it appears they sent some forensic documents to another department.”

“What ‘other department?’”

“Can’t get that info. That file is classified 5d. Do you know what that means?”

“Vaguely,” Cooper shot back. “That you need special clearance to view that type of file. You don’t have access to it?”

“Only a handful of our most senior officials can access it.”

“That kind of restriction isn’t used very frequently, is it?”

“No, it’s extremely rare. I’ve only seen four of them since I’ve been working for the Bureau. What’s bothering you, Cooper?”

“I’m in charge of this investigation. They should have informed me of these documents before classifying them, that’s what’s bothering me.”

“This type of procedure is a high priority,” Matt responded.

“Right—that’s exactly what I have a problem with.”

“Anyway, Cooper, the internal department is hearing our conversation. It’s kind of like you’ve made the problem official.”

“Obviously, but I don’t know if it will help me get answers,” Cooper replied, without bothering to hide his disappointment.

“I personally can’t give you any more information than that.”

“Okay. I’ll be back in touch, Matt. And I haven’t forgotten your twenty bucks.”

“Sounds good. Talk to you soon, Cooper. I’ll let you know if I hear anything.”

Cooper put the phone on the table and went out on the front porch to get some air. The stars were sparkling in the clear sky with a few lingering clouds. Sharp as a scythe, the rising crescent moon looked to him like a fatal smile. He sat down on an old rocking chair rotting in a corner. He rocked back and forth slowly at first, to make sure that the seat would hold up, and then gradually increased the range of motion. He tried to relax but couldn’t. The

forensic documents that had disappeared into an ultra-confidential 5d file were rolling around in his head. Cooper was organized and methodical; starting a mission with incomplete data was interfering with his process. He took a deep breath and tried to let himself go in the movement of the chair. Internal Affairs no doubt had good reasons to initiate this procedure. The FBI was a perfectly oiled machine that left nothing to chance.

But beyond that, he sensed something was fundamentally abnormal in this investigation. The impression hadn't left him since he'd arrived in St. Marys. Now that he was in these woods, the feeling of some hidden evil was gradually gaining the upper hand over the technical questions. The nature of the facts alone went beyond the usual parameters of such cases. Aside from instances within a single family, serial child abduction cases were countable on the fingers of one hand. What kind of monster could plan the kidnappings of such young kids, and most importantly, for what purpose?

Cooper got up to reheat his omelet and went back outside to eat it. The last clouds had drifted away, revealing in the night sky all the constellations that space could offer the eye. He consulted the forecast for the next day, which predicted stable, sunny weather. He finished his meal and went to bed. A good night's sleep to restore him was ultimately all he needed.

Perched on the black wings of a huge nocturnal bird, Cooper circled in the sky above the valleys. The icy night was freezing the forests. Far below, he could see fireplaces glowing through the treetops, small islands of light in an ocean of shadows. Children's silhouettes danced around them. He could hear their songs and laughter rising and then dispersing into the sky. But when the giant bird swooped down toward the children, their songs stopped, and the fireplaces went out one by one before he could reach them. The children melted into the night before he could make out their faces. One by one, they disappeared.

At seven a.m., his watch's vibration alarm pulled him out of this hypnotic dream. He rubbed his neck for a long time and noticed that someone had stuffed the mattress on which he had slept with dried hay and then sewn it back together. Through the dormer window, he saw bluish glimmers of dawn already enveloping the woods. He got out of bed, splashed cool water on his face to wake up, dressed quickly, and strapped on his backpack. He set off for a reconnaissance loop of the area, a first contact with his surveillance zone.

The sun was now shining brightly, but its rays couldn't penetrate the canopy. Shadows plunged the forest into a dusky halo where they danced, mocking the daylight. The deeper he went into the woods, the more ominous grew the feeling he had felt since the beginning of his mission.

A kind of emptiness was forming inside him.

It seemed as if the flame of his life were refraining from shining, to protect him from some unseen breath.

Something was watching him.

He was almost sure of it. He took the time to analyze this impression; he knew that an external, very real cause always triggered the “watched” feeling. He then understood what was behind this feeling: since he’d left the cabin, he hadn’t heard any bird songs, animal cries, or grunts. All life seemed to be missing from the woods, as if death itself held these places in the palm of its hand and was blowing this macabre silence from its withered mouth. Cooper was a seasoned agent, but at that moment, he felt the cold bite of fear. A primal fear. From the depths of his being, his instinct warned him of an unspeakable danger.

He came to an old railroad viaduct overlooking a gorge. At the very bottom, a small stream was raging. The steel structure was no longer in use, judging from the grass growing on the tracks. The rusty old beams and moldy boards didn’t deter him from crossing the gorge.

Once he reached the other side, he left the abandoned railroad tracks and climbed the hillside. At the top, he took out his binoculars and meticulously scanned the landscape before him. The extremely clear weather that usually followed a storm was an unexpected bonus: visibility was perfect. The ocean of greenery was clearly visible through the binoculars. He didn’t see anything that would suggest human activity on this side of the hill. He climbed higher up the bluff and directed his gaze toward the expanses in the opposite direction.

A small valley suddenly drew his attention. The morning mist seemed to be lingering there, even though it was almost ten o’clock. It could be a microclimate or simply a network of underground caves from which colder air emanated. Once again, he felt the weight of the silence that permeated the area. As far as he could see with his

binoculars, there wasn't a single bird flying, not even the smallest insect. He tried to find a rational explanation, telling himself that fall wasn't the time for life to flourish; it was quite the contrary.

But this absence was unusual if not downright abnormal.

He turned his attention to the misty valley. Now that he thought about it, it could just as easily be smoke from a fire as fog. He decided to take a long break on this hill and got a little something to eat out of his backpack. While chewing a bacon-flavored energy bar, he lit his stove to heat up a mug of soup. He waited patiently for two hours, sitting in the shade of a spruce tree. When he picked up his binoculars to look at the valley again, the carpet of what seemed to be fog was still hanging over the woods.

He marked the spot on his map.

He would go there the next day to investigate the phenomenon.

Now he had to return to the cabin to get what he needed to spend one or two nights on the hill. He got up and headed back, taking the same route he'd taken on the way there. This saved precious time, and he covered the ten miles to the cabin at a run, leaping on the rocks, silent as a Native American hunter tracking an animal. Even if the clue to this misty valley was meaningless, he was now onto something. He picked up the pace without thinking, as if to get out of this silence or avoid looking for possible causes for it; in any case, he wouldn't find any. He was now running completely irrationally. He was almost lost in it. He clung to the vision of his dream: the faces of the children played and danced around the flames. But again the darkness swallowed them up and swallowed him too, leaving him floundering in uncertainty. Every second counted. He was running faster and faster, gasping like a

runaway horse. He had become the prey; an invisible predator was hovering above him, around him. Of course, all of this was surely an illusion; some situations could give birth to the most absurd mental constructions.

But the silence and inactivity in these woods was very real.

And it remained perfectly inexplicable.

As soon as he reached the cabin, he quickly gathered everything he would need to be self-sufficient for several days. He planned generously because he didn't know how long this excursion to the valley with its strange mists would take him.

In addition to his usual revolver, a Glock 21, he equipped himself with a sniper rifle perfect for hunting—in the unlikely event that he would find game. But this weapon would be indispensable if the kind of beast he had come to hunt in these woods made the mistake of coming out of the shadows. Cooper had authorization to kill if necessary.

He noted in his report the improbable facts he had observed with a simple sentence: "Significant lack of forest wildlife activity in the area." He quickly devoured another energy bar and set off again.

The night was as black as ink, but the moon would soon rise. He noticed that he had almost grown used to the silence.

And he wasn't happy about that at all.

The day had faded into the twilight and gradually surrendered what rightfully belonged to the sovereign night. The night that, every evening, slowly clothed the woods with its sumptuous robe of darkness.

Now, shadowy, teeming things could wander freely, and all fears found their reason for being. Men and beasts could hide in their lairs, huddling feverishly together to

preserve the pale glow of their lives. There was no longer an answer to any question. The darkness shattered reason, letting doubt and ignorance prevail. Since the dawn of time, humans had told the most terrible stories around the fire. Sometimes, they were true. Evil took root and spread in the night.

The moon rose majestically above the woods.

Cooper sat for a moment contemplating the crescent of pale light. He sometimes expressed his feelings about such moments in words—simple and efficient prose, like him. During these moments, he always felt a deep inconsistency in his life. Far from being a poet, he was almost no different from the beasts he hunted.

He dispelled his thoughts and focused again on his mission.

The moon now gave off only a faint glow, but it was enough for him to advance safely along the path. He wasn't using any kind of direct light because it could betray his presence. From a practical perspective, the night was an effective tool. He stood up and continued his journey. Less than an hour later, he was close to his target and set up his camp a few hundred yards higher on a slope. He decided to wait until the next day to begin his investigation in the misty valley.

\*

The same dream disturbed his sleep that night. He was once again on that bird. Its immense wings beat the darkness in a muffled rustle. Down below, winds swept the woods, making them look like an ocean of shifting shadows. He tried to see the glow of the bonfires around which the children danced, but there were only the dark waves of the forests came and went with the winds. He felt the bird

rise sharply and saw the black ocean receding rapidly below. The beast was climbing higher and higher into the starless skies, flying faster and faster. Suddenly, he fell into the void.

He woke up with a start, gasping.

His watch read 5:30. He unzipped his tent and slipped out quietly. He pulled on his boots and drank a few sips of water. The moon had disappeared behind the hills, but the dawn that replaced it was beginning to filter through the woods. He made a few moves to get the blood flowing; he stretched like a cat, bending and extending. Then he climbed on a rock to observe the valley that lay about two hundred yards below. There was no sign of human presence, and still no evidence of animal life anywhere. He checked the magazine of his handgun, slung his sniper rifle on his back, and began to climb the rocks to the top of the bluff.

He took his time climbing, placing his hands in solid, rough holds, his senses alert. As he climbed, the night dissipated, making way for the first diaphanous light. When he reached the top, the autumn sun was beginning to pour down on the red and bronze foliage.

He had a clear view of the terrain in the valley where the mysterious mists persisted. From where he stood, they looked like puffs of smoke emerging from the ground in the most unlikely way. He slipped his hand into his back pocket and took out his camera to take precise pictures of the phenomenon. Suddenly, a shriek echoed through the valley. He looked up at the sky and saw a huge bird of prey circling above him. He captured the moment with several skillful photos. It was a magnificent osprey with a wing-span of more than six feet. It had probably been looking for food for hours, and having found no prey, it was beginning to take a serious interest in him.

"You haven't found anything to eat, poor thing, but I won't be your lunch," Cooper said.

For a few seconds, the bird of prey brought back thoughts of his enigmatic dream. He looked for a vaguely premonitory meaning in it. When he looked up at the sky to see the osprey again, it had disappeared into the distance. He heard its cry echoing one last time in the next valley, and then the deathly silence settled back over the woods.

He brought all his attention back to the blanket of mist. Incredibly, it seemed to keep spreading slowly as the day dawned. He took more pictures and filmed the progression carefully for a good five minutes. At the bottom of the valley, under the puffs of mist, he could make out a circular mound that rose above the undergrowth. Huge boulders were piled up in a strange way, protruding from the layer of mist. He put the camera away and decided to go down the steep slope to explore the area.

He rappelled down the face of the rock and carefully penetrated the blanket of fog. The temperature here was noticeably colder. Swirls of mist curled around him as he passed and then clung to his legs, strangely wrapping around him as if endowed with life. He climbed up the side of the mound and arrived in the clearing where the huge boulders he had seen from above stood. They were arranged in an organized manner, surely the remains of a building he judged to be very old. The structure was enormous. The ruins formed a number of concentric circles made of massive megaliths, most of which were still standing up, pointing toward the sky. The tallest of these structures was at least thirty feet high. His detection equipment still didn't indicate any activity. He entered the misty maze formed by the stone blocks. He took several photos and then, keeping his camera in his hand, he

wandered around for several long minutes before arriving in an open area at the center of these ruins. He jumped onto one of the rocks lying flat and pulled out his voice recorder. He sat down to start a report.

"After spotting a small valley where persistent mist suggested a human presence, I went to the site. Like all the territory I've covered so far, the area shows no sign of life. I've just entered a structure located on a mound at the bottom of the valley. It looks to me like an ancient ruin. The temperature is abnormally cold. I have not yet found any rational explanation for this phenomenon or for the lack of animal life in these forests. Even if these facts raise questions in my mind, they are outside the scope of the investigation. I will still continue my research in this area and spend two nights here."

For a long time, he strode through the corridors of the ruins without finding a single clue; then he went back to his camp to eat. After downing some potato soup, he made himself some coffee.

Sitting with his back against a stone, he studied the immobile layer of mist. A thought suddenly crossed his mind. He grabbed his voice recorder and turned it on.

"Although I have no expertise in archaeology, I should mention that these ruins seem extraordinarily old to me. The question that arises is the origin of these structures. On the American continent, this type of construction seems improbable at the very least. Some of the megaliths I've observed are clearly sunk quite deeply into the ground. The arrangement of the structure, at least the one visible on the surface of the mound, evokes that of a sacred place, such as Stonehenge in Europe. Except that here, the boulders are more numerous and much larger in size and volume."

He stared into the ruins and, for a few seconds, tried to imagine which indigenous people could have created them. The powerful Native American Shawnee, Mohican, and Susquehannock tribes, who had remained independent of the English and French, certainly had very ancient origins, but this rock looked truly primordial. He fed his thoughts with a sip of coffee but eventually pulled himself together.

He was getting sidetracked.

He chugged down the rest of his coffee. He had already wasted too much time with these questions. An archaeologist would have to answer them, not him. He prepared his bag to get moving again. His movements were quick and focused, but his hands trembled. Thoughts of the dream of the children dancing and laughing around the flames had returned.

Someone was holding them captive somewhere in the vicinity. Maybe some of them were suffering atrocities at that very moment; maybe they were already dead.

He wrapped his climbing rope around his shoulder and went back down to the ruins. Once he reached the foot of one of the largest boulders, he threw the grappling hook, which immediately found a grip, pulled the rope taut with a sharp tug, and climbed up the side. At the top, he set up a camera that would film the scene continuously; then he did the same thing on another boulder. He could control the entire monitoring system remotely from the forest rangers' cabin. It would instantly notify him of the slightest detected activity, whether human or animal. Spending another two nights here would slow down the mission, but oddly enough, he felt a need to stay.

These ruins exercised a pull on him that he couldn't explain.

He hesitated.

One more night seemed like a good compromise.

He went back to the tent to look for a tool that would enable him to take rock samples. A small hammer would do the trick. First, he had to break the weathered outer layer that covered the original stone. He started by hitting it as hard as he could. Fragments of brittle stone flew in all directions. He continued pounding the rock for what seemed an interminable time; his forearms were like two burning torches. Why did he keep hammering? Shouldn't he have left this work to a specialist? When he broke through the layer, he had cut through about eight inches of rock. He was sweating and panting like an animal.

The last rays of sunlight no longer penetrated the thick fog that bathed the maze. He put on his headlamp and pointed the beam of light at the circular gap he had managed to carve out. The mineral now visible was an intense black, as dark as the darkest night. The lamp's light shone in an incomprehensible way: the stone seemed to be absorbing the light from the LEDs. It was as if the darkness of the unknown rock were swallowing the light. He tapped his headlamp several times, but it was working just fine. He took it off his head to get a closer look at the incredible phenomenon. The strange rock shone under the weakened glow of the lamp and seemed to capture its energy in successive waves. The unfathomable mineral surface seemed to be consuming the light field. Stunned, he watched as the LEDs blinked and dimmed with each surge of light until he saw the lamp go out completely, one last time, for good. He was going to have to make do without a light.

He raised the hammer and brought it down on the jet-black surface. The sound of the sharp blow shattered the silence. Despite the force of the impact, he could tell that the stone had remained intact. He tried again, using even

greater strength, but again the tool bounced off without damaging the rock face. He raised the hammer again and slammed it down with all his might, letting out a yell. Nothing. Not a single chip broke away from the rock.

Cooper took a deep breath to calm the emotion that overtaken him. Discouragement had replaced curiosity. He took some time to think. Analyzing this mineral wouldn't help the investigation, at least not at the moment.

The children had resumed their macabre dance in his head.

He tapped his headlamp again, but it remained dark. He studied the alignments of immobile megaliths in the night. He suddenly felt tiny before this immensity in the eye of infinity. He had a feeling that that these ruins contained a secret as ancient as the cosmos.

He put the hammer away and took out his voice recorder.

"October 4. Day Three of the mission."

He looked at his watch.

"9:08 p.m. This investigation is starting to take an improbable turn. As I noted earlier, I have so far observed no form of life in these woods—no bird songs, no animal cries, except that of a hungry osprey circling above me. Even the streams seem to rein in their flow. And now these ruins sit enshrouded in an inexplicable fog that lingers night and day. I just tried to collect rock samples from one of the megaliths that form a maze in the center of the ruins. The material this stone is composed of..."

He chose his words carefully, preferring not to mention the phenomenon he had observed.

"...is unknown to me. It is extraordinarily dense. I couldn't extract even the smallest fragment. I'm almost forgetting the purpose of my mission."

His gaze again rose to the upright stones in the milky night, almost in spite of himself. He felt a hypnotic fascination that he immediately dispelled.

"I'm going to go back to the cabin and regroup. I'll use the opportunity to take a different route and extend the area of surveillance."

"Cooper, you wimp! It's your turn! Jump!"

"Go ahead, Eliott! Don't chicken out!"

Over eighty feet of nothingness stretched just below his toes, which were clinging as tightly as they could to the rusty steel railing.

"Cooper, don't listen to him, dammit. You'll end up as flat as a cherry pie. It's gonna be ugly!" shouted his friend Will.

The two of them were always in on that kind of escapade together, behind the walls of the boarding school. Eliott turned toward Will, his back to the void, with a wide smile that lit up his angel face. Still wearing an expression of delight, he launched himself from the bridge, flapping his arms and imitating the cry of a raven. The fall seemed endless. His stomach rose so high into his throat that his bird cry turned into a gurgle. He plunged into the eddies without too much trouble.

But getting out of the rapids was more difficult.

"Excuse me, are you Mrs. . . ?" The white-coated young intern was pale.

"Cooper. Lorna Cooper," replied the slender, mousy, young woman who was hiding her tears behind a white handkerchief. "I'm young Eliott's mother."

The man swallowed and looked grave.

"Mrs. Cooper, your son Eliott is suffering from multiple contusions, including a severe head injury. He's—"

"Tell me if he's going to be all right, Doctor!" she interrupted in a wrenching tone, overwhelmed with grief.

"Your son is hanging between life and death, ma'am. We'll do our best to bring him back."

The young brunette stood motionless, letting her tears stream down her cheeks like an autumn rain, facing the window of the intensive care unit where her son was lying in bed.

As for Eliott, he wasn't there. He felt neither bedridden nor even that he was in a hospital room. He was perfectly happy and fabulously free, swimming in the foamy waters of the river and joking with his classmates in the sunlit waterfalls.

He was unaware that his vital functions were growing weaker minute by minute and that his heart would eventually stop beating if he let himself fall into a deep sleep.

He kept on swimming, laughing, and playing on the riverbanks.

Eliott's father, a colossus almost six and a half feet tall, was of Native American origin through his mother Kanda, a full-blooded Tolowa woman. She had been praying and performing rituals throughout the week that Eliott was in a coma. She was the only person allowed to enter the intensive care room when Eliott's vital signs were almost nonexistent. She came to sit by his bed and whispered sacred words to him. She knew that, from the depths of the darkness into which he was gradually retreating, he had heard and understood them. Her words in the Tolowa language thanked the spirits and asked them to welcome him back into the world of the living.

The young raven survived.

Since that accident, Cooper connected with what the shamans called "the other side." Grandmother Kanda deliberately did not pass on to him the knowledge she had inherited from her ancestors. But she told him the teachings followed strict rules. Eliott's journey into the spirit

world made him an *Iyayenagi*, living on the side of the living with his spirit on the other side. The gift he had received without knowing it prevented him from initiation into shamanic practices, even the simplest rituals. These abilities had great power. Yet they could have a negative effect on his human experience if he used them too early without proper introduction to them. Maybe one day he would discover them for himself. On that day, Kanda or another wise one would be there to teach him how to master this gift. But then again, maybe he'd never discover it. The rule was that only he could recognize it. No shaman would help him reveal his abilities.

Like the Lewis River rapids, Cooper's young life didn't flow smoothly. His parents had to take him out of the Portland boarding school due to ongoing disciplinary problems. He was then sixteen years old, stubborn, arrogant, and rebellious. His father, discouraged, entrusted the problem child to his own mother.

Kanda was almost a recluse, living in a village that clung to the slopes of Mount Jefferson south of the Warm Springs Indian Reservation. Even though Eliott wasn't thrilled with the idea of living with his grandmother, he had no choice. But it was in these mountain valleys, far from the world, that he lived the most beautiful and richest years of his life.

Grandmother Kanda had remained the young flower she had always been: a former hippie who had gone to Woodstock and fought for all the lost causes of the time. With patience and love, she healed his teenage wounds. Eliott spent most of his days helping her with the crops in her fields. She made a meager living from selling her medicinal and aromatic plants. Before the long winter months, Eliott chopped wood in the early morning with an ax—the chainsaw was harmful to the environment. How

many lively evenings had he spent with her, remaking the world while listening to old records from Creedence Clearwater Revival, Ravi Shankar, the Grateful Dead, the Doors, and others...

Three years went by. When he was old enough to decide for himself, he dreamed of traveling the world, thirsty for adventure. He left the farm and moved to Portland, thanks to the modest savings he had managed to accumulate. He lived on his own for a few months in the chaos of the city. He then decided to join the army on the advice of his father. "You can see the country, and it will discipline you. You need it," his father told him.

Grandmother Kanda didn't approve of this decision. She was sorry to see him go. However, after giving him a traditional Native American education for three years, she had brought out the best in him. Eliott was still young, but he was kind and ready to experience his life as a man in the tumult of the modern world.

When Cooper woke up, his watch read 6:18 a.m. He got up, splashed water on his face, and stepped out the front door to check the sky. Although the sun hadn't yet risen, the day was shaping up to be gloomy. A dry breeze was blowing, heralding a harsh, early winter. He came inside and revived the fading embers with old newspapers he'd found stacked at the bottom of a closet. He put more wood into the stove and waited for the fire to start heating the cabin before resuming his research.

In front of him, he set up the two screens he was going to use to view the surveillance images. He had his own laptop in addition to the secure federal service material. He connected everything to a portable server that was, in turn, connected to the American defense satellite network. This sparse equipment, which fit on the small table, was actually a distillation of the latest generation of military technology. Cooper had recent training on how to take full advantage of it. He found all of this much too complicated, even though designers had made the interface intuitive. The Bureau now trained all new special agents in the use of these tools. It was no longer conceivable to do without the considerable tactical advantages the new technologies offered. Cooper had joined the party a bit late. He had kept it to himself, but he felt completely lost with all of this equipment. In his opinion, nothing beat intuition in the field. He was old school.

He started by connecting to the internal communication network and then paid his friend Matt a virtual visit.

Matt's chubby, geeky face appeared on the screen, topped by a New York Giants baseball cap. His shaggy brown curls sprung out around the edges. His voice expressed a happy surprise.

"Hey! Hi, Cooper."

"Hey, Matt."

"Is it the light, or do you really look like death warmed over?" Matt asked.

"I'm staying in a forest ranger cabin. There are only candles for light, or else I have to wait until daylight."

"You old dog—you're looking for news about the 5d file, aren't you?"

"Do you have any news?" Cooper asked.

"Not yet, but it shouldn't be much longer."

"I'm all ears," Cooper said.

"I have a meeting this afternoon with a guy who will surely have some information for me. He works in the specimen department at the central repository. Anyway, that's all I can tell you right now."

"Perfect. We'll touch base at the end of the day," Eliott decided.

He was about to end the call when his friend stopped him.

"Cooper?"

"Yeah?"

From under his visor, the forty-year-old teenager squinted and peered at his friend suspiciously.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

"I've walked over forty miles in two days. I'm just a little tired; that's all."

"That's nothing but a little fitness walk for you! There's something else going on. What is it?"

"Everything's fine, Matt. I'll be expecting your call."

"Okay, talk to you later, Cooper."

He went to reheat some coffee and then opened the surveillance software. A question occurred to him. How far did the area of desolation he had seen in the woods extend? As he zoomed out, a geometric shape emerged: that of an enormous circle about twenty-five miles in diameter inside which the thermal sensors detected no organic heat. It was a perfectly proportioned circle, absent of all life.

A terrible thought went through his mind.

He immediately zoomed toward the center of this circle and saw a milky spot through the clumps of vegetation, like the whitish pupil of a demonic eye staring at him. He shuddered. According to the satellite data, the misty valley was at the exact center of this macabre circle.

His watch started vibrating. It showed the name David Mullay. Supervisors usually didn't contact their field agents directly.

The call surprised him.

Cooper turned his webcam toward him and accepted the video call. It was Mr. Mullay, forty-eight years old and proper, with his fitted gray suit and golden-boy looks.

"Hello, Agent Cooper."

"Hello, Boss."

"Well, what do we have in these forests, Cooper?"

"Not much, so to speak."

"Could you clarify?"

"I started going through the area with a fine-tooth comb. There's no evidence to suggest any suspicious activity—not a trace anywhere."

He was going to tell him about the circle of desolation, but he changed his mind because Mullay would have thought he was crazy. Besides, as incredible as this phenomenon might seem, it had nothing to do with the case.

"If the perpetrators of the abductions are in this forest," Cooper continued, "they must be ghosts—or else professionals, which is unlikely . . . unless someone commissioned the abductions."

"That's not very likely, Cooper, but we have to consider everything. In my opinion, this type of monster is more a matter for psychiatric professionals."

"Of course. Only extremely disturbed minds could be behind this."

"We're currently searching the files of hospitals responsible for these types of patients."

This was Cooper's opportunity to raise the omission of the documents from the 5d file.

"Speaking of files, my folder is missing the forensic team's full report on the deaths of Garett and Kaitlyn Pearson, the parents of the last victim."

The supervisor's face went blank.

"You've been assigned a very specific mission, agent Cooper. Don't go beyond the scope of your investigations."

"It seems to me that the Pearsons' death, or rather their assassination, is totally related to my investigation. The details define the modus operandi of the perpetrators of the crimes. Having them in my possession would be . . ."

"Must I remind you," the supervisor cut him off in a frosty voice, "that you are in these forests to locate and stop the threat posed by these criminals, whoever they are? Let the expert teams identify them. Have I made myself clear?"

The supervisor glared at him like a reptilian predator ready to pounce on its prey.

"Perfectly clear, Boss."

"Good. Keep me personally informed of the progress of your investigation. I will leave you a phone number where you can contact me at any time."

An attachment appeared at the bottom of the screen.  
“Got it, Boss.”

“Perfect. I won’t delay your work any longer. I expect to hear from you soon, Cooper.”

The screen immediately switched to a dark blue background displaying the FBI emblem. A statement was blinking in the middle: “End of communication.”

For a long time, he stared at the three words that appeared and then disappeared on the screen. This unexpected call from Mr. Mullay only added to the strangeness of this whole situation.

Cooper settled back in his chair and took a sip of coffee. Outside, the breeze had become gusts, which were rattling the cabin’s tin roof. The sky was still as gray as ever, and aside from the wind whipping the branches around, the forest was still just as gloomy.

Without expecting much, he reviewed the data from the network of sensors he had set up in the woods. As expected, nothing had triggered any of them yet. Then he tackled various searches on the federal service intranet. Next, he studied the geological heritage of Pennsylvania and the history of its ancient indigenous civilizations. He even compared the circular structure of the ruins with every type of remains recorded around the world. Several hours had passed, and the daylight was already fading. He had spent the day in front of his screens, almost for nothing. He remembered that his friend Matt was supposed to call him back to give him information. He was surprised that he hadn’t yet heard from him. That wasn’t his style. Matt usually kept his word.

The next day passed the same as the day before. Matt hadn’t called back, and when Cooper tried to contact him, he got his voicemail, which said his friend was on leave. The bastard could have told him.

The following days were just as dismal. His trips into the woods to extend surveillance coverage were becoming a heavy burden. He had the overwhelming feeling that the sepulchral force was working against him, as if the death at work in these valleys was trying to paralyze him in a miasma of sluggishness. His research on the origins of the ruins didn't allow him to draw any conclusions, let alone identify the builders. Besides, was it really about the ruins? He wasn't sure anymore. He wasn't sure of anything anymore. In this cabin in the middle of the woods, he was starting to feel like a shipwrecked man clinging to a buoy drifting on an unknown ocean.

### *October 14*

On the night of the twelfth day, at precisely 11:41 p.m., an alert went off.

Cooper rushed to his workstation. An icy tension gripped him as he viewed the images. They were coming from sector E. More precisely, they were coming from one of the two cameras placed at the top of a megalith in the ruins.

"I've got you," he whispered, adjusting the sharpness of the picture, "whoever or whatever you are."

At first, he could only make out three shadows. They stood motionless in the open area at the center of the maze: three silhouettes. They were slender and delicate—obviously young women. One of them held an object with both hands. He thought it must be a book, a large volume. The perfect triangle created by the three shadows remained in place for quite a while, equilateral under the almost-full moon as it rose.

He quickly established communication with the satellite relay agent.

"This is Cooper, in the coverage area north of St. Marys. I see movements in sector E; do you see them too?"

"This is satellite surveillance. We've got them, Agent Cooper."

"I'm going to the site. Keep me informed of even the slightest movement."

"Copy that. We won't budge."

In a few seconds, he strapped on his equipment, checked his weapons, and left the cabin at a run.

He dived under fallen trees across the path and leaped onto rocks, nimble as a cougar, adrenaline flowing into his arteries to the rhythm of his rapidly pounding heart. He maintained a constant speed without exceeding his limits, as he had seven miles of running ahead of him.

"Agent Cooper, it's moving. Repeat: It's moving."

"Copy. How is it moving?"

"Slowly—toward the south."

"In a vehicle?"

"No, on foot. Wait... It's stopping now, in the vicinity of the ruins."

He reached the abandoned railway bridge and jumped from one tie to the next, careful to avoid falling through the gaps where they were missing. He climbed the hill and then ran down the other side after cresting the top, hurtling down the stone scree at full speed.

Six more miles to go. He crossed the last hills, picking up speed. He paused high on a rock to take a break. He could see the valley in his binoculars from the rise where he stood. He gave himself five minutes to catch his breath, and he was off again, as quiet and agile as one of his Native American ancestors.

He had crossed the last stream and was climbing the last hill to the promontory when his earpiece crackled.

"Agent Cooper, we've lost them! I repeat: the targets no longer appear on our visuals."

He stopped short and checked the screen on his wrist. The three points that satellite surveillance had locked on had in fact disappeared!

"Shit! That's impossible!" he shouted.

Silently, he climbed the steep slope overlooking the valley, and when he reached the top, he secured himself to the rope to descend in a stealthy rappel. He crept to the entrance of the maze and walked the paths, peering at the surroundings, his senses alert.

The three shadows had left the area.

"Satellite surveillance, this is Cooper. Do you have a visual on me in the area?"

No response.

"Satellite surveillance, I repeat: do you have a visual on me?"

Silence, once again.

"Nothing's going through here!" he exclaimed. "The fog must be blocking it."

He climbed up onto a megalith whose top rose above the milky fog.

"Satellite surveillance, do you read me?"

"We read you, Agent Cooper."

"The persistent fog covering the ruins is interfering. Did the targets show up again outside the valley?"

"Negative."

"They should have—unless they're still in the area, which I doubt.

"Check your sensors."

"I will, once it's daylight. I'm going to stay here tonight and probably the next few nights too. If our nocturnal visitors reappear, I'll be there to see what they're up to."

"We'll stay in constant contact with you."

"Perfect. Out."

He shed his equipment. He was dripping with sweat. He staggered down to the stream, knelt at the water's edge, and plunged his head into it, taking large, cold gulps while he was at it. After he set up his tent, he took no time sliding into his sleeping bag and dropping off to sleep.

When he opened his eyes, the sun was on the horizon. The whitish veil that floated above the circular alignments of megaliths overshadowed the dawn's glow. The huge stones rising toward the sky looked like frozen sentinels. What kind of secret were they keeping? He had pitched his tent in the crevice of a rock, hidden behind the foliage of bushes and ferns. He climbed out of his sleeping bag and remained naked for a few minutes, stretching, letting the cold air energize his slender body with its well-defined muscles. He got dressed, walked to the stream to splash water on his face, and then set to work.

Cooper spent most of the day checking the devices he had set up around the valley. Although everything seemed to be working, but the system had recorded no images or sounds, which was technically impossible. Yet all he could do was observe the facts, powerless to change them. In addition, the blanket of fog made satellite transmission impossible. Had the three silhouettes that had appeared last night taken advantage of this invisibility to disappear? Had they realized someone was observing them?

He tried several times to break through the interference and restore the signal under the layer of fog, but to no avail. And when he came out of the mists and contacted the satellite relay agent . . .

"This is Agent Cooper."

He heard only silence.

"Do you read me?"

He let nearly a minute go by.

"Satellite relay, do you read me?"

There was no response.

He changed locations and repeated the call with no result. The signal no longer came through, even outside the blanket of fog.

The interference zone appeared to have extended beyond the valley.

"This is Agent Cooper."

After a few minutes, he abandoned his attempts to call.

In addition to the communications, Cooper soon realized that every device he had installed was now inoperative. He sat down and thought calmly about possible solutions. If he returned to the cabin, he could surely restore transmissions from the server. His main concern was the nature of the malfunction. It was like some kind of virus had spread. His computer equipment did show symptoms of a viral attack. He was now completely alone and could only rely on himself to hold his position in the area. For a long time, he watched a loop of the brief images capturing the three silhouettes that had appeared during the night.

The circular alignment of the megaliths suggested that these ruins could have been a place once sacred. The three female shadows might have been performing some kind of ritual there. He deduced this by reviewing the recordings where one of the silhouettes was probably holding a book open in front of her.

He got up and took a few steps, still lost in his thoughts. The absence of wind plunged the woods into such a state of immobility that even time itself seemed to have stopped. He tried to re-establish the satellite connection without success. It would have been wiser to go back to the cabin to notify headquarters and get some backup, but he decided to stay hidden in the ruins. His feeling that the

three shadows would appear again that very night had hardened into certainty.

The daylight slowly faded, making way for dusk. The night spread like black water into every corner of the woods. He had positioned himself up high on a hill away from the mound so as not to leave any area of the maze outside his field of vision. He stretched out on his stomach, partly covered by a carpet of humus. With his eye to his telescope and keeping within reach what little equipment was still working, he waited. Around eleven p.m., a breeze stirred, lifting dead leaves that danced in the corridors of the ruins.

"A little movement," Cooper whispered, following the leaves through his viewfinder.

At 11:28 p.m., the wind blew harder now, howling a funereal lament between the old stones. This place was nothing more than a sinister theater where the only performance was death. The moon finally rose and shed its light on the mantle of mist.

That's when he heard noises farther down in the valley.

They were coming toward the ruins.

He listened closely, holding his breath.

Crackling twigs resonated like thunderclaps in the silence unbroken until then.

They were definitely footsteps.

And the footsteps were getting closer.

A surge of adrenaline swept through his body. His index finger flexed automatically on the trigger of his gun. The three silhouettes appeared, climbing the mound without a sound, as light as the mist that wove around them. It seemed to welcome them with its milky coils.

They were three young women, strangely identical, extraordinarily beautiful. Their black hair curled over their shoulders. Their graceful faces were as pale as the moon that had just risen. They glided between the megaliths and seemed to float above the ground in their dark wool robes that trailed behind them. They looked around suspiciously, and then one of them became engrossed in reciting psalms, but Cooper didn't recognize the language she was speaking. They arrived at the center of the ruins and positioned themselves in a triangle, just as they had done the previous night. Cooper crawled toward them, positioning himself high up so that he could observe them better.

Once he was above them, what he heard froze the blood in his veins. The one chanting had begun shaking. Her voice, or rather *the voice*—because what came from her throat could not belong to a young woman—was fluctuating wildly, in an almost palpable insanity. Her face had transformed into that of a vile creature, convulsed by evil in its raw state. Blackish, coagulated blood oozed from folds that streaked her cadaverous complexion. And as her hideous mouth vomited a flood of sinister words, she trembled as her bulging eyes feverishly followed the lines in the huge book she was holding.

The other two circled around her with slow, solemn steps, occasionally stroking her hair affectionately. After a long while, the malevolent incantations stopped, and the three silhouettes froze in place. They remained there for a

several endless minutes, standing perfectly still without making a single sound.

Cooper lay there watching them, half petrified, struggling to make sense of the situation. Torn between disbelief and terror, he was as silent and motionless as they were. Then they came back to life. The officiant once again had the appearance of a young woman as surprisingly beautiful as ten minutes before. Then they left again, inscrutable, toward the bottom of the valley from which they had emerged.

Cooper didn't have enough evidence to intervene or send a credible report to his superiors; at least he had nothing that related to the disappearances of the children of St. Marys. But he was onto something serious here. Luckily, he'd managed to record the scene on his cell phone.

*Witches*, he thought. Although Native American blood flowed through his veins, this kind of belief was foreign to him. However, he had to face facts; he had obviously just witnessed what seemed to be a witchcraft ceremony.

The next day passed again in the gloomy tranquility of the bleak woods. The stench of the malevolent energy that had spread the night before still floated in the air. Putrid odors heavy with miasmas attacked his nostrils with each breath. In his report, he noted that these fumes could only emanate from the ground, just like the stubborn mists whose vaporous composition was still unknown to him.

"Day Fourteen of the mission," he began, speaking into his recorder. "Last night, the ruins were the scene of events I would describe as occult. Three female individuals engaged in esoteric practices similar to those of the black masses associated with witchcraft. Is there a connection between these three young women, these singular ruins, and the kidnappings in St. Marys? This is the only

question to which I must provide a concrete and rational answer, even if, for the time being, many of the events that have taken place in these forests remain difficult to explain.

He picked up his phone and opened the file of images he had managed to film. But an error message indicated the file wasn't readable.

At dusk, a huge moon rose, even fuller than the night before. Soon, it bathed the woods in light. He was hiding in a cavity just above the place where the ceremony had taken place the day before, almost part of the rock. He had been on the lookout for several hours, practically invisible, his face covered with black paint. He knew the three priestesses would eventually show up. His hunting instinct had never failed him; maybe this was a gift from his ancestors. So when he heard the rustling of crushed leaves and branches shaking, he wasn't surprised.

The three silhouettes stood outlined in the silver light. They walked solemnly toward the ruins, their faces covered with hoods. One of them had a large basket made of black fabric slung over her shoulder; it clearly contained something heavy. They arrived at the flat, circular area at the foot of the large megalith on which Cooper was hiding. They pushed back their hoods. Their angelic faces were so close that he could describe their graceful contours in detail. While two of them set up a circle of torches, which they lit one by one, the third drew the lines of a large pentagram on the ground with a white powder. Their preparations now expertly completed, they began their macabre ritual.

Two of the priestesses bowed gracefully to the enchantress, who slowly undressed until she was almost naked. Only a sheer veil covered her, hinting at her breasts

and intimate parts. The other two started chanting, gradually entering a trance. They were now performing a haunting dance around the first one. One of them then grabbed a torch and placed it over a stone altar. She ceremoniously pulled the huge book she would use for the ritual out of the black basket. She placed it in the hands of the officiant, who opened it up and began to chant its evil verses.

The other two seemed to be at fever pitch and struggled to contain their frenzy. They stomped their feet, shouted, and beat the air with their arms, like puppets waiting for the hand of evil to come and seize the strings of their will to animate them.

The officiant, now shaking with violent tremors, approached the altar. Cooper then noticed something at ground level. He had a clear view of a blackish cloud that rose from the ground and curled over to the officiant's feet. Then the thing slowly rose up the length of her legs. As if animated by some form of consciousness, the repulsive swarm seemed to seek out the moist warmth of the priestess. She stood with thighs spread, ready for the hideous fluid to penetrate her. Then the thing suddenly slipped into her open crotch. The priestess shuddered with convulsions, carried away in a deathly metamorphosis. At first, Cooper heard bones cracking. Then dark smoke, as thick as ink suspended in water, began to gush out through all the poor girl's pores and orifices. She flailed and uttered horrifying screams. The black cloud masked her atrocious transformation; its tendrils coiled around the young woman in sinister embraces. When the screams had faded, the priestess's body, now as dark as coal, had stretched, grown in height. The creature had to be ten feet tall. Its face was now decrepit, as black as ebony, split by two reptilian pupils, and adorned with an

oversized mouth that crossed its entire width. The teeth were like a row of sharp, black, shiny blades. Heavy threads of drool flowed from its vile mouth, which continued to issue a stream of incantatory gurgles. The creature reared up and sniffed the air. Cooper held his breath. The thing then approached the altar, opened the black fabric hamper with its outrageously long, bony hand, and emptied its contents onto the stone altar.

At that instant, reality tipped into the most brutal horror.

On the altar lay a shapeless, bloody mass. Cooper adjusted the brightness of his viewfinder to get a clear look. It was the mutilated body of a young child. Hysteria had taken hold of the other two women, whose dancing had turned into violent spasms. The creature also seemed to be in the grip of a force that had taken possession of its awful carcass. It threw itself on the child's bruised body and began to devour it with furious greed. Cooper heard the creature's jaws and sharp teeth dislocate the bones and tear apart the flesh. Without waiting another second, he grabbed his handgun to put an end to the carnage. He leaped down from the top of the megalith, landing in the middle of the pentagram less than two yards from the creature. It swung around in a flash and stared at him with its pale eyes. It stopped chewing and studied him with interest for a moment. Cooper gave no warning before emptying his clip into the beast, which collapsed.

The other two harpies froze and stared at him, petrified with terror. He suddenly realized that what they were actually looking at was behind him, floating above his head.

It was too late.

The black cloud descended on him.

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When Cooper opened his eyes, the sun shining above the milky mist of the ruins blinded him.

He was stretched out on the ground, completely naked.

He was cold. His body radiated pain.

In his mouth, a harsh, gamey taste gave him uncontrollable nausea. He vomited the contents of his stomach, dumping a stream of reddish liquid onto the grassy mound. Blood mixed with lumpy substances, torn, crushed, bits of bone of varying sizes. He fell to his knees and emptied himself again in a liberating spasm.

"What's happen to—?"

A third ruby-red stream gushed from his mouth, along with partially digested bits of flesh. He covered his mouth with his hands out of reflex, both to stop another bloody torrent and stifle a scream, but he couldn't contain either one. He howled a primal scream like a newborn baby opening his eyes to the kingdom of hell.

Then he collapsed on the wet ground, curled up, and shook with spasms. Only after a long time did he open his eyes again and look to the sky, begging for all of this to be just a nightmare. But the sight of his body covered in coagulated, black blood all the way to his feet, and stinking of death, wasn't a hallucination. He tried to pull himself together and regain as much focus as possible. He needed to understand what was happening to him and find solutions—fast.

How long had he been unconscious? He was now down below the maze, near the stream. He had probably rolled down here after losing consciousness. He gathered his remaining strength and climbed up the mound. Questions rushed through his mind, each more inconceivable than the last, but he ignored them so that he wouldn't have

to imagine the possible answers. His clothes were scattered throughout the corridors of the ruins. He picked them up and dressed as well as he could in the clothes that weren't torn. He tried to recall the events that had taken place before he lost consciousness, but a vague fuzziness clouded his thoughts. His last memory was killing that creature, then . . . nothing, just a total absence of memory. He stumbled from rock to rock, dreading what he was about to discover. When he reached the circular area, what he saw made him retch again, but with nothing left to vomit, he could only belch loudly.

Cooper fell to his knees on the ocher earth covered with blood. Shredded pieces of flesh—the remains of several bodies, apparently three in total—littered the ground. The evil force had trampled the satanic pentagram, now almost wiped away. Images flashed through his mind. Salvos of ever-bloodier scenes exploded inside his head. The unbearable visions linked together until they assembled into a coherent chronology. His memory managed to reorganize all of this abominable chaos because it was necessary to understand, to carry out a reconstruction. His rationality and powers of analysis regained control. He managed to realize objectively what had actually happened.

He remembered the black cloud, the incantations, the priestess transformed into a monstrous creature eager for blood. He remembered the massacre that followed and his intervention. The images were jerky, shaky, and in a confused order. He managed to visualize the black cloud penetrating his body, stirring his entrails, stretching his bones, tearing his flesh.

And then he saw in his mind, with the eyes of that creature he had become, all the horror—all the horror he himself had perpetrated.

That night, Agent Cooper, who had been pursuing and tracking evil for years for the FBI, had just executed the most unbelievably atrocious acts the human consciousness could imagine. Based on the condition of the bodies and the scraps of memories that came back to him, he realized he had partially devoured the three young women, alive, and the remains of a child, probably one of those missing from St. Marys.

Those were the facts.

Even if all of this was hard to believe, objectively speaking, this was what had happened. Something had taken complete control of his will and seized him as one grabs a simple object, making any use of him it wanted.

"Okay . . . Now what do I do?" he shouted, agonizing with horror.

He felt like a tightrope walker, dancing a waltz with madness, twirling above the underworld on a thread that threatened to snap at any moment.

He looked around, haggard, unable to ask himself any more questions. The question machine had short-circuited. Scattered here and there on the ground, the dismembered bodies shrieked all the horror of the night. They hung on the walls of the megaliths like the improvised ornaments at a funeral. Cooper crawled to the altar and knelt before the remains of what he assumed was the child. All that was left was a thin row of vertebrae coiled in the bloody reservoir.

He remained prostrate, unable to make another move.

His tears continued to flow, as cold as the rain that had just started to fall gently, as if washing the soiled stones. Then an object caught his attention behind the altar, at the bottom of roughly carved steps. A wave of clarity overwhelmed him brutally—a tsunami.

*The book.*

Cooper jumped to his feet. His movements were no longer coordinated. All his energy went to the few powers of deduction he had left. He stumbled down the stairs like a disjointed puppet and collapsed at the bottom, his face in the mud. He dragged himself over to the voluminous work, whose leather cover shone in the rain. He grabbed it, rolled onto his back, and hugged it to him. Then he wiped it and covered it with his jacket, just as he would have done with one of the surviving children.

This book must contain the explanation for what was happening to him, the process, whatever it might be, of these bloody transformations. The text would lead him to the author—or at least to a follower who could interpret it.

He jumped up and climbed back up to his camp, not forgetting to gather up his weapons and the rest of his equipment scattered throughout the ruins. He folded his tent and analyzed the bloody scene one last time. Investigators would identify his DNA on the witches' remains; that was a given. He could try erasing any trace of his presence, but a cover-up would get him nowhere. Even if he were able to keep his colleagues at bay, it would only be for a while.

He needed to play the truth card.

And to do that, he first had to shed light on the metamorphosis he had seen at work on the priestess before it had seized him.

The main thing was that he was not responsible for the atrocities, he was certain about that, including from a legal perspective. But he could hardly prove that something outside—some powerful force—had taken control of him. The nature of these phenomena was beyond his comprehension, however, this was the atrocious reality.

Cooper was sure of that fact : somewhere, there was a rational explanation for all of this.

"Can you repeat the last part, Cooper—the part where you shot down a metamorphosed witch who was devouring a child? I think I misunderstood you. Plus, it's four in the morning."

Colin Andrews was the only effective team member with whom Cooper had completed several missions. Over thirty years old, he was a sports fanatic too. He and Cooper looked like brothers. Andrews was technically flawless, like Cooper, and used to working solo. He was Cooper's perfect reflection, as if it had detached itself from the mirror and materialized in his professional life. There wasn't real camaraderie between them; it was more of a rivalry that pushed them to outdo each other. But there was nothing unhealthy in their competition, just a drive for perfection and a sharing of good practices.

Cooper desperately needed help. He needed to present the facts to an agent who would feel the duty to be objective. For him, it would be inconceivable to hide what had really happened in those ruins, and he also felt an overwhelming need to get it out.

"Listen, Colin, I'm not asking you to understand. I myself don't have any idea what's happening to me. I'm just asking you to listen to me."

"Okay, Eliott, no problem. It's just that I didn't catch everything. I must not be completely awake yet; that's all."

Cooper took a deep breath to lower the adrenaline-shaking his entire body. "Okay, I'll take it slowly from the beginning, Andrews. Have you heard about the St. Marys investigation?"

"Of course. Did you know Mullay wanted to put me on the case?"

"You're lucky he didn't. Ever since I arrived in the town, I've felt something was wrong. When I started my research in the woods, things really started to get bizarre."

"Why in the woods, since four of the kidnappings took place in town?" Andrews asked.

"Actually, the first four cases all have the proximity of rural areas in common. That's what guided the investigation. The fifth case only confirmed it."

"Timothy Pearson, age five. I have the investigation summary report in front of me."

"Exactly," Cooper replied.

If his colleague had made the effort to connect to the FBI network, it meant that he had gotten out of bed and was taking things seriously. Cooper continued with renewed confidence in his voice.

"So here I am in the woods, where I've been living in a forest ranger cabin."

And he laid out the facts with an unwavering concision, without forgetting the slightest detail, all the way to the end.

A few seconds of silence between the end of his story and Andrews' reaction.

"My God, Cooper... Tell me this is a joke."

"I'd give anything for it to be a joke. I need your help, Andrews. I feel like I'm about to lose it."

I... This is a fucking nightmare. No one's going to believe that, buddy."

"Do you think I'm crazy, Andrews?"

His colleague didn't answer.

Cooper clenched the phone so hard that he almost shattered it in his hand. He screamed, "Andrews, do you think I'm out of my mind? Answer me, damn it!"

"I think you're not well. Where are you right now?"

"Shit, you think I should be locked up, don't you?"

"You definitely need help."

"Listen, I don't give a damn what you think! I have to present the facts as I experienced them. The people who analyze this discussion will verify my sanity."

"If I can give you some advice, you should wait right where you are until some agents arrive. Is that clear, Cooper?"

"Fuck off, Andrews."

He cut the call, opened the case of the cell phone he had just used, his personal one, and ripped out the microchip. He got up and threw it into the crackling fire in the stove.

Less than an hour later, he set out to travel twenty miles north and relocate to another cabin almost identical to the first one. He had made sure to rid the first one of any traces. From now on, he would have to do the same for any place he stayed, even for just a few hours. The time until all the state police forces would have his portrait posted in their offices was very short: he figured under two days.

He had lost all hope of finding the other children from St. Marys alive. In any case, he was no longer in any position to continue his investigation. Right now, he had to think seriously about how he was going to get out of this situation. He had sat down and was staring at the only object on the table in front of him.

### The book

It looked like a worn grimoire—a book of magic spells—with a cover of thick brown, almost black, leather, polished by the years or maybe even the centuries. The cover bore a series of symbols unknown to him, probably belonging to some mystical alphabet of another age. The yellowed pages formed a stack at least three inches thick; it was coarsely made, with a strong musty smell. He hadn't

opened it; he settled for looking at it, feeling intense repulsion at the thought of going through its pages. Just seeing it, he couldn't stop the flood of abominable scenes from coming back up in successive waves. The images submerged his thoughts, and he remembered the monstrous greed with which he had devoured the priestesses, or rather the greed of the creature inside him that had taken over. The taste of blood in his mouth, the screams, and the pleading had excited and enraged him even more. How could such a thing have taken control of his being? And if that transformation could reoccur, when would it happen again?

His life had turned upside down in a kind of unreality where not every moment fit into temporal linearity. The doors of a diabolical dimension had just closed behind him.

Most striking was the clarity with which he viewed this horror as a whole. He was entirely aware of what had happened to him. The events were all the more appalling. He wasn't physically weak; on the contrary, he had reached the second cabin in under four hours. His physical abilities even seemed to have increased. A mixture of adrenaline and an energy he felt as evil, syrupy, and black flowed through his veins. His body was full of unspeakable sensations he had never experienced before, undoubtedly caused by the transformation. The pain wasn't localized, but it moved around under his skin and inside his body. It caused waves of intense tingling, like larvae stirring and wriggling in his flesh. His muscles contracted compulsively under the effect of widespread spasms, and his bones felt pulled in opposite directions. But the physical pain was nothing compared to the severe stress that would not let go of him.

He got up abruptly and searched his bag. Feverishly, he pulled out the voice recorder and switched it on.

"Day Sixteen. I'm no longer able to fulfill my mission in these woods. I will try to be concise and clear, as clear as possible, to explain the metamorphosis occurring in my body. I am unable to resist it. The cause of this transformation seems to be a volatile cloud of black particles, a cloud no more than three feet in diameter. Or else it's the incantations. How do I know? I clearly remember that after I had neutralized the creature and was making sure I had killed it, the cloud of black particles descended on me. The last clear image I have is the imploring look of the other two women paralyzed by fear. I only now realize what their eyes were begging for—my mercy—because the metamorphosis had changed me into—"

Convulsions suddenly seized Cooper's body. He was wracked with coughing. Blood dribbled from his mouth. He jumped up and ran to vomit a stream of hemoglobin out the cabin window.

"Shit!" he swore. He twisted in pain and slumped against the window. "This is never going to end!"

He took an old rag from a cupboard and roughly wiped his mouth. Then he sat back down, his eyes clouded by his determination to get out of this hell by any means possible. He cleared his throat and continued as calmly as he could.

"I myself find it hard to believe the words I'm about to say, but this is all very real. After the malevolent cloud engulfed me, it transformed me in turn into a creature similar to the one I had just killed. I remember a reddish veil distorted my vision, pounding to the rhythm of the filthy heart of the beast I had become. I remember the icy burning, a devouring hatred that consumed the body I found myself in. By the dancing flames of the torches around the

pentagram, I can still see limbs splintering in my greedy jaws. I caught the witches by their hair and slammed their bodies against the stone until I dismantled them. I clearly remember my dismay and my total inability to control my actions, or more accurately, the actions of this flesh-eating creature. I still have the gruesome feeling of blood spouting under my teeth and flowing down my throat, the vile pleasure of tasting it as the most delicate of nectars. Oh, God, forgive me!"

He stopped talking and paused the recorder, short of breath due to his efforts to control himself, to keep himself from snapping. He was perspiring and felt other convulsions waiting to overwhelm him.

"All this nameless horror. Why?"

He collapsed into sobs, unable to stop, as if a mechanical need to empty himself of this emotional overflow was draining all his tears. When he emerged from this semi-vegetative state, he realized that over half an hour had passed. Dully, he went to fill a glass from a bottle of bourbon collecting dust on a shelf. He downed it all at once, emitting a mindless grunt. He hadn't had a drop of alcohol in years. It wasn't a solution, much less a cure for his pain. He shook himself to come to his senses.

His gaze returned to the book sitting exactly where he had left it on the table. For the time being, this book was the only key he held, the only one that could open a door out of this nightmare. If he found the author, that person could break the spell that possessed him. For what he felt growing deep inside him, shaking the depths of his soul with abject turmoil, was indeed a spell lying in wait. It was a sleeping beast watching for the moment to take complete possession of him.

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