

# Mama Lacey

A Novel by  
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*1927. Lacey is 82 or 83. Fighting hard against the ravages of time on her proud bearing. Skin still smooth and brown like a pecan shell. Eyes starting to cloud over, but still capable of a fiery glare.*

*Standing guard against the vile ways of people and the hateful things they do to one another*

Sheriff Colter let the horse set its own pace as he made his way from town to Mama Lacey's homestead. There wasn't much to speak of about the land out this way, it was mostly flat enough to work, if it ever stayed dry long enough. There was a path through the scrub pines where he stopped the horse and tied it off. The shafts of morning sunlight cut through the loosely spaced trees in a patchwork pattern. Most often when he paid anyone a visit there was the barking of a dog to announce his arrival, but never at Mama Lacey's house. The house sat center of the clearing, small but neat with a porch just big enough for a rocking chair. There was a coop off back a little ways for the chickens that made busy with anything on the ground at their feet. The sheriff knocked, and the young girl gave him a short look before disappearing back inside to fetch Miss Lacey. Sheriff Colter took a half step back and settled onto the porch step.

After she made her way out, Lacey leaned forward on her curled-stick cane and fixed her failing eyes on the big red-faced sheriff. The little old woman's small round face was amazingly free of wrinkles, and on a fine summer morning such as this she should have been beaming her normal smile that puts you in the mind of a cherub happy in a fountain. Instead she gave the sheriff a scowl that evidenced her many years on this earth. The birds and insects that normally create a chorus of sounds seemed to fall silent when she started to speak.

“ They came down here and tore everythin' up. Ridin' thru here on them horses all high and mighty. Think don't nobody know who they is with them rags on they head. They beat po' Junior till I couldn't stand it no more. I picked up one of them fire sticks they was wavin' around. Touched it to the back of the horse Mista Powers' boy was ridin'. That buckin' horse gave em' somethin' else to think about. Po' horse was doin' his best to get shed of that Powers boy and put out his tail. Didn't mean to hurt the animal but I had to do somethin'.

The rest of them knew to stand they ground cause them wild fools'll kill anybody that can whup em' in a fair fight. They 'spect an old woman like me is crazy. They don't bother the old folks. Some of them got a little bit of breedin' in them. But I aint crazy. No sir. I'm old and tired of this foolishness.”

The sheriff tempered his voice as he laid out his case. “Well Miss Lacey, Mista Powers says you owe him a horse. Said his son was just over here visitin' with Junior about some business. His boy tells him fore' he knew

what was happenin' ya'll jumped him and set his horse on fire."

Mama Lacey tapped her stick on the porch to reinforce her position.

"That rascal got the fire part right but he just flat left out the part about them hooligans he come ridin' up he with. 'Mazin how the mind can forget some parts of what done happened. You go on back where you came from and tell Mista Powers if he want the truth to come on down here and see me hisself. He know where I live. He own everything around here 'cept where you standing."

The sheriff had an understanding of her point and tried to make it show in his voice. "I hear what you sayin' Miss Lacey but he's talkin' about swearing a warrant out on Junior. You know that means I'd have to come back and arrest him under the circumstances."

Mama Lacey narrowed her eyes and stood as straight as the years would let her. "I know you got to do whatever they tell you cause you just like the rest of them, bought and paid for. I gave you my answer. If he got to get a warrant or whatever to make hisself feel better then that the way it be. But you and me standin' here know the fuss over that horse gonna stir up a dirty breeze.

Tell him what I said and let him do what he gonna do."

Lacey dismissed the bewildered sheriff with a wave of her walking stick. He was stuck on the step as if his foot was glued down. It was his duty to lay down the law even as he saw the old woman on the porch as the warm smile and healing hands that made his childhood illnesses go away. Growing up,

everybody knew that Mama Lacey could make you better when nothing else worked. He continued to talk to her at the same level.

“Miss Lacey you know I think the world of you, but this is a fight I don’t think you ready for. Mista Powers...”

Mama Lacey raised her stick and swung it from side to side

“I done told you what I got to say about all this. Now my breakfast’s getting cold sittin’ on the table. I done heard that man’s name too many times today and I don’t wanta hear no more.”

With that statement the little woman spun back towards the house and went inside without looking back.

The sheriff managed to unstick his foot and started away from the house down the dirt path. There was big fire in that little old woman’s eyes. Sheriff Colter knew the word in these parts was that if there’s one person you don’t want mad it’s the old woman that slammed the screen door in his face like he didn’t exist. There was all kinda talk about the things she could do. Nobody ever said it flat out, but in whispers it was said that Miss Lacey had control over spirits and the like.

Colter wasn’t a superstitious man but he did know that there’s things that go on in this world normal folks just can’t explain. This was gonna be a true test of wills. Justin Powers was a man that got his way no matter who or what was in his path. Colter knew that boy’s story was a bunch of hogwash. That snot-nosed youngun was always off seein’ how much trouble he can stir up,

knowin' Daddy will drag him off the fire every time.

“You got something to say to me sheriff?”

Justin Powers never looked up from the ledger he was fingering. The oversized book looked small lying on the huge desk in the study where sheriff Colter stood nervously as the houseman backed out of the room.

“Miss Lacey says she was within her rights.”

Sheriff Colter tried to soften the little woman's stance before the imposing presence of the man hunkered over the book. Justin Powers went on about his task of checking the figures laid out on the many pages. His every word dripped with the threat of many people paying the price for his dislike of the situation.

“So what do you expect we should do about this sheriff? My son says he has been wronged by these people and you bring me word that they feel the same way. Looks very much like we have stories that go in both directions at the same time.”

The sheriff shuffled his feet on the polished hardwood floor as he searched his head for an answer. Powers started tapping his finger as if counting how

long it took the sheriff to speak. Each fall of the digit on the polished surface was a resounding thud in the icy silence. Sweat rolled from the sheriff's armpits down his sides making him sway slightly as he adjusted to the trickle. He ventured a statement that he hoped would close out the countdown.

"I suppose I could find Judge Haynes and have him draw up some papers..." The slow drumming didn't cease, sheriff Colter made another attempt at appeasement. "...I've already got young Mr. Powers' statement so it shouldn't be any problem to get the warrant issued right away."

The finger dropped to the desk for the last time and made a slow circle. Justin Powers only shot a glance upward as he acknowledged. "I trust you to do the right thing sheriff."

Almost as if on cue the houseman was back and making a sweeping gesture towards the door signaling the end of their conversation. Sheriff Colter followed the tall slim figure through the hallway like one of the pets being let out to do its business. Once out on the porch alone he could mop at the sweat that was coating him like a second skin.

He already knew where to find the judge. He would be holding court at Millie's, the local watering hole, lawbook in one hand, glass of whiskey in the other. It wouldn't take any convincing, the name Powers didn't leave

anything open to question. Sheriff Colter knew he would soon be holding a warrant for Miss Lacey's grandson, a thought that made his blood run cold, he wasn't sure who he feared more. He knew that Mr. Powers could strip him of his authority as sheriff and most likely make his life miserable in many other ways, but the talk of Hell here and in the afterlife once Miss Lacey gets done with you makes the possibility of public ridicule a winning choice.

Sheriff Colter reflected on Jake Fowler and his run-in with Miss Lacey. The bartender at Millie's had sent word about a disturbance and when he got there the sheriff found Jake in a drunken stupor ranting and raving about what she put on him; "I gave her them damn chickens back. I didn't know they was hers anyway. She claims they was all dead but I know they was alive when I left them on her stoop in that bag. Now they won't stop screamin' at me. Don't you hear them!"

The bartender came up and gave the sheriff an update. "Him and some others decided to raid Miss Lacey's place a couple of nights ago. Haven't seen any of the rest, but he come in here this morning looking all wild-eyed with this story about voices hollerin' at him."

Jake had gone from drinking from a glass to sucking the whiskey right out of the bottle. The sheriff reached for the bottle and the man shrieked. "don't take that away, I'm tryin' to make 'em stop." He gripped the bottle like it

was a rope that kept him from falling into a bottomless pit.

The sheriff enlisted the help of a couple of patrons to wrest the bottle from the deranged man and bodily carry him to the jail where he could sleep this off. Jake was rattling out sentences between his low moans. “The rest of ‘em run off into the woods but that ain’t gonna help. It’s everywhere, don’t you hear it?” His question was almost a plea.

Once they got him into the cell he curled into a ball and wept softly. The helpers shrugged their shoulders at the unusual occurrence and started their way back to Millie’s. The sheriff tried to concentrate on some papers but the constant beseeching for mercy from the cell drove him from his office. He figured it would only be a matter of time before the man drifted off into oblivion. He’d check on a few things around town and come back.

The barbershop was abuzz with the latest gossip. “Hey sheriff, hear you got a crazy man down at your place. Them damn fools oughta know better than mess with that old woman. Everybody knows she can reach out and get ya’.”

The talk was all the same as he made his rounds, with most folks feeling that Jake was getting what he deserved. The walk back to the jail had him wondering just how much of the talk was true, did Miss Lacey have some special powers or was it mostly just the stuff of overactive imaginations. The quiet in the jail was especially unnerving. He crept back toward the cell with

the intention of checking on Jake but not disturbing him from whatever kind of sleep he had fallen into. He was not prepared for the sight of the man dangling from the light fixture by the makeshift rope he had made from a sheet. The eyes that stared out from the red face were still wide in horror.

Sheriff took a long minute to compose himself before he went into the cell. On the off chance that Jake might still be alive he went about checking for a pulse. The body was cooling and clammy to the touch. He took out his pocketknife and sliced through the sheet sending the limp form crumpling to the floor.

Even now, as he stood before the entrance to Millie's, sheriff Colter could see those eyes. Word was that the undertaker had the damndest time closing them during the embalming. Folks would long say that Jake went into the ground with his eyes open. After that, there were very few run-ins with the locals and anybody that lived on the dirt path leading to Miss Lacey's place.

Sheriff Colter could feel a chill run up his spine as he made his way in to speak with the judge. Something in him knew there would soon be a struggle that could play out in that same eerie fashion. The judge looked up from his makeshift desk at his approach. "Afternoon sheriff, you here on business or pleasure?" the judge hoisted his half-empty glass at the last word. After a moment of sizing up the man before him, the judge formulated his own answer. "I suppose this is an official call. What can I do for you?"

The sheriff attempted to make his request sound like business as usual. “Gonna need you to draw up papers for a warrant, Junior Lacey.” The name pulled some of the color from the judge’s reddened cheeks. “Seems Mr. Powers wants him charged over young Master’s horse.” The judge downed the last of the brown liquid in his glass before he spoke.

“Seems pretty clear to most of us that boy was in the wrong.” He made the statement in a hushed tone. The sheriff’s stoic face and posture told the judge that all that didn’t matter to the case at hand. “Alright. I’ll get on it right away. I’ll run it down to you before too late. Don’t know what’s gonna come of this but we both know it ain’t gonna be good.” The judge looked slyly around to see if anyone else was taking note of their conversation.

Sheriff Colter didn’t offer up his opinion on the matter. He had done what he was send down to do and the rest was dirt that’ll come out in the wash. The wind seemed stronger as he stepped out of Millie’s. there had been a slight breeze on his way here, but now it was a steady swift flow.

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Terry was helping Mama Lacey clear the dishes from the table. It was always the same way, you get through eating you clean up the dishes. She knew better than to ask direct questions but she always found a path to ease

her curiosity. Little girls like her had been told enough times that they were supposed to be seen and not heard. Mama Lacee had went about finishing her interrupted meals with stabs at the bottom of the bowl containing the delicious bean soup Terry so loved.

“Maybe it didn’t do yo’ belly no good to stop and start eatin’ like that, you alright Mama Lacee?” Terry used her best little girl voice to make the inquiry. The old woman humphed aloud and kept to her task of sorting the dishes for washing. Terry took that as a no trespassing sign and was about to give up her pursuit when Mama Lacee slammed the pot into the sink and filled the kitchen with the quick jarring noise.

“There’s always gonna be folks that will try you. You got to stay strong and be ready.” Mama Lacee started to draw water into the pot. The screech of the pump handle was like the cry of a wounded animal. Terry wasn’t sure if the words were directed at her or to the room in general. “you only ten but it’s time you know.”

Terry was now sure who the words were for but she had no idea what they meant. She came alongside Mama Lacee at the sink and matched the little woman for height even at her young age. She was swirling the water in the pot and Terry heard but didn’t understand the low words Mama Lacee chanted. The liquid spun in a lazy circle, catching the light and reflecting it back into Mama Lacee’s eyes. Terry looked down and for a second it seemed that the reflection changed from the pair of faces peering in. Mama Lacee

spat into the twirling water and the vision cleared and Terry could see the sheriff standing on the steps before the local tavern.

Mama Lacey spoke to the image. “They plannin’ something to try us. Making theyselves feel better by callin’ it legal. She spat again and the sheriff was standing before the judge looking like his pants was full of fire ants. He was twitching and sweating as he talked to the judge sitting at one of the tables. “We’ll see him back here with his piece of paper. He just doin’ what they tell him. Caught up in the swell of them that make the big waves.”

Terry couldn’t make sense of the statements but she knew that there was something coming over the rise with a bad omen tagged on. She wanted to ask a million questions of the little woman but felt it best to wait until she could sort out just what this was all about. Mama Lacey looked to her as if she could hear the little girl giving voice to all the whats and whys swirling in her head. “You’ll know more in time child, there’s many ways to get to see, this is just one.”

Mama Lacey stopped tilting the pot from side to side and allowed the water to settle down to a flat plane. “It’s just a mirror till’ you give of yourself, then things are revealed. The more you need what you give, the farther you can see.” The advice was lost on the young girl’s ears as she continued to look into the pot.

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Justin Powers stood in the window of the library watching the field hand working the Chestnut colt that belonged to his son. The horse was admittedly skittish after the tail burning and had taken to rearing up at anyone who approaches. The majestic brown horse was headstrong as a colt. Maturity had brought with it a stubbornness that so reminded him of the lad that first wanted no part of the animal. Young Justin had been more than a handful since his mother died of the fever when he was eight.

It was a test of wills as the broad shouldered worker strained against the leads to bring the horse down from his rising position. For a moment it appeared that the handler was winning the contest when the proper application of hoof to chest sent the man reeling away. The horse bounded away in triumph as the handler thrashed on the ground in discomfort.

Powers turned back to the desk laden with papers, he had already started to chart the direction he would take once the judge set the wheels in motion. It stood to reason that the horse would never again be fit for his intended purpose as a rider. So the next step comes in the form of an unfortunate accident that puts the animal down and the high price he paid at the yearling sale two years ago could easily be adjusted to equal if not surpass the price of the land where the guilty party resides. Foreclosure would be swift and

complete, and from there the plan moves forward.

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Sheriff Colter tried to settle down and get some sleep but it seemed the covers on the bed were conspiring to wrap him up in a further knot of confusion. His thoughts trailed back to the judge's armchair prophecy about nothing good coming from this. The well of his thoughts produced the picture of Jake Fowler swinging from the light fixture in the cell. The wind had blown hard that day too. As he sat up to rearrange the mass of bedding making like a constrictor snake about his legs he could hear the low moan of the wind as it whistled around the corners of the house. This wasn't a fight he wanted to be part of. Justin Powers is a powerful man in his own right but there was no way to measure the strength of the little brown woman with the eyes of an eagle. Eyes that look like they can spot you anywhere.

He felt as if she could see him now wrapping the covers about his freshly chilled body. It was like the wind was now blowing directly across his bed. How can she make the wind blow so cold? It had to be her, her and those powers. The sheriff tried to go back to sleep, but it was a fitful attempt as he knew what he would be up against tomorrow when he served the papers on Miss Lacey. There was no way for him to bow out of this, and run like the scared dog he was. He was chained to Justin Powers by debt and fear, but there was things he couldn't even imagine once he got on the wrong side of

that little brown woman. His soft moans died away as sleep put a temporary end to his woes.

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Terry watched Mama Lacey as she paced the kitchen. She wasn't even using her cane as she came full circle from the stove to the table, only to turn around and walk back. She did that two more times before she went to the sink and pulled over the wash pan, making that scraping sound that is screechy and hollow at the same time. She didn't even give a grunt as she pulled down on the pump handle to start the water draw. The old handle didn't creak as loud as it usually does, like it was trying to be quiet so not to upset anything. Terry wanted badly to go over and watch up close but she knew better than to come when she wasn't called.

Mama Lacey pulled three hard times and the water belched out the big spout and splashed easy into the pan. Most often it would lap over the side and wash down the side of the sink, making the gray sides dark. But not this time. Everything did just what it was supposed to do and no more. She couldn't see what Mama Lacey pulled out of her apron pocket, but whatever it was she ran it around wiped it on the side of the pan before she put it back. Terry knew that water was turning in a slow circle that starts the picture. Mama Lacey had to call her over so she could see. After what seemed forever, Mama Lacey spoke more to the water than to Terry when she said, "Come on over child".

Terry tried not to look too anxious as she almost bolted from her chair. Mama Lacey was standing between the oil lamp up on the shelf and the pan of water, but there was no shadow in the water as it moved around the pan of its own accord. She wanted to ask how that comes to be but Mama Lacey only told her to come over, she didn't say nothing about talking. The wind that came from nowhere over their shoulder made the swirl of water sway from side to side. Mama Lacey reached over on the drain board and picked up the paring knife they had used earlier today to core apples. She held the knife in one hand as she held out the other hand and punched the tip of the blade into her thumb. When she pulled it back the red drop formed a ball before it let go and plopped into the pan.

The twisting water spread the drop of blood around in a pink swirl and as it mixed in the image started to form. Mister Powers was sitting at a big desk, the light in the room was kind of like the first light of morning, just bright enough for you to make out the rough edges. There was all kinds of papers spread out before him. He held up one of the sheets and it was like the words were printed on the wrong side, Terry could make out that whatever the collection of words she couldn't understand meant, it must be mighty important. Mama Lacey stared for a long minute at the image and she started to hum softly.

In the background a shape that was just a dark splotch suddenly showed itself as a cat. The creature seemed to hear Mama Lacey's chanting as its

ears twitched in effort to locate the sound. It flashed green eyes straight out of the image as if it was aware of the two of them peering into the water. Mama Lacey reached forward again and brought forth another drop of blood with the knife. It hit the water and started to spread out without disturbing the mirror surface. The cat stood suddenly and tensed. Mister Powers was full busy with his reading when the cat sprung from its position onto the desk top sending much of the papers flying and causing Mister Powers to rear back in his chair.

He made to hit the cat and in the process knocked over the lamp on the desk, spilling the oil onto the overcrowded desk. As he attempted to rescue the papers, the entire surface of the desk turned into a giant candle. Flames danced all around as Mister Powers waved in vain. He fell back when the flames threatened to set his robe on fire. Soon the houseman appeared with a rug and started to beat out the fire. The cat had backed off into the shadows but Terry could still see the green eyes reflecting the light from the flames threatening to take over the entire room. The houseman soon got the blaze under control as Mister Powers sat back in his chair with his eyes wide in wonder.

Mama Lacey waved her hand through the water and made the image turn into a mass of ripples. Terry wanted to see more but she knew it was over. Mama Lacey turned away from the pan and made her way to the table. She sounded weary when she spoke. "Throw that out the back." She said in a

voice that was almost a whisper. Terry was at the door with the pan when she heard Mama Lacey declare to no one in particular. “That there’ll give ‘em somethin’ to think about.” When Terry came back in Mama Lacey wasn’t at the table and the room had a smell like a candle that has just been snuffed out. She rinsed the pan and made her way to the back room where her pallet was waiting. She bedded down into a fitful sleep that brought on dreams of even more things she couldn’t figure out, producing more questions that she dare not ask.

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Sheriff Colter knew from the whipped puppy look on the houseman’s face when he came to the door that there were things wrong. Instead of ushering him into the house the man pushed his way out onto the porch, keeping a wary eye over his shoulder like some kind of mountain lion was stalking him. He started to speak in a low, almost out of control voice. “You better come back later, we had a fire in Mista Powers’ study last night and it’s a big mess. He’s about ready to bust a gut, fumin’ and throwin’ things. Those papers you were supposed to pick up are ruined. He’s trying to find somebody to throw his wrath at, but the only one to blame is the cat. Jumped up on the desk and upset the whole apple cart. Never did that before...” the man’s words were cut short by a bellow from within the house. Sheriff Colter had heard Mister Powers plenty mad before, but the sound coming from inside said it was wise to heed the houseman’s warning.

“I best get back in and see what I can do, he’s tearing the place up looking for that cat. Says he’s gonna skin him personally.” The houseman’s words had the kind of relief associated with knowing he was not on the chopping block. “I’ll tell him you was here, I don’t think you want any parts of him right now.” The man spun on his heels and was back inside before the sheriff could sort out anything to say. He stood for a long minute on the porch listening to the railing voice of Mister Powers and the attempts at consolation from the houseman.

Then it was there again, that slight but cool wind that comes over his shoulder and sets his senses on edge. In an attempt to locate the source the sheriff wheeled in the direction of the ill wind only to see the black cat sitting on the far rail of the porch taking him in like he was some kind of sideshow object. The animal was not the least ruffled by the shouting and banging coming from inside. The sheriff backed off the porch, all the while keeping the cat in his sights. He turned to make sure he didn’t fall down the steps and when he looked back the cat was gone, more like it was never there in the first place.

All the way back to the relative shelter of his office at the jail, the sheriff was just so sure something was watching him. He kept stealing glances over his shoulder, so sure he would see the cat trailing his path, but there was only the feeling. It didn’t go away as he almost ran into the jail like he was

being chased. He leaned against the inside of the door and attempted to collect himself. He wasn't at all sure what he was so worked up over, there would be no way he could explain his racing heart and rasping breath. But whatever it is has more than a little to do with Miss Lacey. Everybody knows it, but few dare say it, even to themselves, lest she might hear.

The sheriff had just about regained his composure when the jangle of the phone set off an entire new string of nerve endings. He knew it couldn't be something as simple as Mrs. Weathers not being able to find her wandering bulldog. As many times as that woman has called, sheriff Colter has advised her; "Git the dog fixed and he'll be a lot more inclined to stay home." The ring seemed to be rising in strength the longer he stood rooted in his spot by legs that refused to respond to his brain's orders. The sound had all the makings of bad news.

When he finally lifted the earpiece from the hook the voice carrying over the background crackle asked. "Sheriff? That you?" It was Judge Haynes, his words had that early afternoon slur to them that said he'd been hitting the bottle since daybreak. He started speaking as officially as he could muster. "You have my authority to pick up Junior on charges to be filed later. You make that happens soon now, you hear?" As the judge's voice died away there was only the static. Colter finally found his voice and ventured a reply. "Somehow this don't all seem right without papers in hand..." the judge cut him off before he could finish. "Don't you worry none 'bout no damn

papers. You just see to this.” Then there was the click that told the sheriff the conversation was now over.

The line clicked again and the operator was in his ear. “You need to connect with somebody else? Your party has hung up.” The woman intoned like she was reading from a piece of paper in her lap. The sheriff was too numb with the possibilities of what’s down the road ahead. He simply placed the earpiece back down on its hook. The judge must have got a good tongue lashing from Mr. Powers and decided to pass it down. Easy enough for the two of them to decide who gets hauled in when it’s somebody else that’s gotta face the bunches that gather around and look at you like you the devil himself.

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Terry wasn’t sure if the thumping noise was real or a dream. It seemed like only minutes ago when she huddled herself into the covers after witnessing Mama Lacey and the pan of water. The thump was real this time and right beside her head, followed by the voice of Mama Lacey. “Wake up child, you got things to do this morning.” Even through the sleepy haze Terry knew that there was no time to whine or complain about it being first-light, or even earlier as best she could tell. “You go find Junior and give him this.” Terry reached out in the half-light and grasped the stone from the old woman’s hand. It was warm like it had been sitting on top of the stove. “You tell him

to git movin' and now.”

Terry had made it to her feet and could now fully make out Mama Lacey. Her eyes glinted up to Terry as she made sure she was understood. “You go now. He’s most likely up to the Taylor farmhouse. Tell him I don’t want to see him no more till he hear from me.” Mama Lacey turned away and moved almost silently from the room. Terry was wiping the corners of her eyes clean as she cleared the back door on her mission. She knew the way to the Taylor farm well. Junior had a big fancy for the one maid with the skin so smooth and black that she looked like velvet. She easily cleared the low scrub brush that marked the edge of woods beyond the yard. Her long, youthful stride made her look like a deer as she loped toward her destination. The rock in her pocket was a warm reminder of the comfortable spot she was roused from to make this journey.

Mama Lacey won’t accept anything less then Terry doing what she was told. She started to work out in her mind the next place to look if Junior’s not at the Taylor place. The low grass pulled at the hem of her dress and left traces of the morning dew as a reminder. Junior just had to be there. He had to.

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Justin Powers sat before the window and watched the breeze stir the trees in the front yard. It should be nice and warm given the brilliant rays of

sunshine streaming through the swaying branches. Yet he'd had to call in Bell to put another log on the smoldering fire from last night. His call to the judge this morning should set things in motion with or without those damned papers. This process was going forward anyway, it just looks better with the proper paperwork filed. It was just providence that Samuel displayed his wild spirit by jumping the gun and riding down on the Lacees. That young man has the fire and spirit of his dear departed mother.

That band of hellions his son consorts with led him into just enough trouble to make the foreclosure plans more immediate. That freedom rider business is an ugly but useful tool at times. Where as before, this was planned out to be a simple tax foreclosure once the records were set straight. Now, with this horse foolishness he knew that it would not be a matter of time, as the accountants kept telling him. That damn crazy stallion was always more trouble than his worth, but it seems now that trouble is about to pay off handsomely. There is no way those people will be able to afford the inflated price he put down as the value of the animal noted on the formal complaint filed.

They will simply have to follow the word of the law and sign over the deed to the ramshackle house and its associated land. It would only seem fitting that he offer them the opportunity to stay on as tenants once the transaction is made. It wouldn't look good for his image to toss the poor black folks out into the road. Now if he could only get the damn help around here to live up

to the wages he pays them. “Goddamit Bell, I’m still cold in here.” Powers yelled over his shoulder. The houseman appeared like he was standing outside the door all the while. “You get this place warm if you have to start burning the furniture.” Powers barked. “Damn cold as a tomb in here.” Bell took to his task and soon had the fire roaring, but it still felt like the north wind was howling outside.

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Terry was just clearing the last hedge bordering the Taylor place as the morning sun cut the haze of daybreak. She could see the big house off in the distance but her path was along the hedgerow to the workhouse sitting just on the crest of where the land sloped away. She heard a dog start to bark up by the big house but she couldn’t think about that now. There was worse things than getting run down by some hound and chewed all up.

Her long youthful stride closed the distance to the workhouse in quick fashion. She made it to the door just as the barking started in her direction. Junior appeared in the opening, and in one swoop hustled Terry inside by virtue of almost lifting her by the arm he grasped. His eyes had the same deep fire like Mama Lacey. He maintained the grip on her arm as he demanded. “What you doing here little girl. I done told you about followin’ me...” Terry cut his questioning short by reaching into her dress pocket and producing the rock. It was still as warm as when Mama Lacey thrust it into

her hand. Junior stared at the stone for what seemed like forever.

Terry suddenly realized the heavy breathing was coming from her own mouth. It had dried her out so she had to croak out her instructions. “Mama Lacey says for you to take this and git movin’ now.” Junior’s grip on her arm eased and he took the stone from her hand. Terry felt something as he made contact with the rock but she couldn’t make sense of it. Junior’s gaze eased a bit as he replied to Terry. “Awright, you git outta here the same way you come.” He said almost softly. Terry flashed her eyes towards the sound of the barking. “That old dog don’t do nothin’ but bark.” Junior informed her. “Sides you can outrun him anyway.”

Junior wheeled away from Terry toward the young woman that entered the room. Terry only knew her as Black Gal, which is what everybody called her. She was as pretty as she was dark, her clear white eyes were stretched in wonder as she spoke to Junior. “What’s wrong baby?” she asked him. Her voice was deep and rich like Mama Lacey’s coffee. Junior didn’t answer her, just scooped her up in his arms. Black Gal flashed Terry a look over the embrace. Like she was sizing her up. She looked back to Junior and was about to pose another question when he cut her short. “I gotta go, and right now, don’t you worry ‘bout this. I’ll see you soon.” He said as he kissed her on the forehead.

The barking outside died away and Terry took that as her cue to leave. She

didn't look back for fear that it might be the last time she saw Junior and she didn't want to let him see her fright. She was dashing back toward her opening in the hedgerow when the barking started again, only closer this time. She must have taken to the air because she didn't even feel the top of the short hedge pull at the hem of her dress. It was only when she could see the house in the clearing ahead that she slowed her progress from a dead run. Mama Lacey gave her a half smile from her position at the table when Terry came in through the back door. It was a look that said she did good and everything was going to be alright.

Terry went to the potato bin and got out enough to fill the hem of her dress, which was her way of measuring a daily amount of peeling. She made a pile at the opposite end of the table and took down the small tub that hung on a hook by the door. She carved out the eyes and scraped off the black spots before dicing the potatoes into the tub. Mama Lacey always told her to make sure and leave the skin on when she peeled for the family, said that was the best part. As she would reach back to the pile for another potato, Terry stole glances across the table to try and get a sense of what was at this stage a total mystery. Why was the sheriff after Junior like that when he hadn't done anything wrong.

They were just sitting down to supper that night when they heard the horses ride up, it wasn't often that people came up the road after dark lest there was some kind of trouble, and when they started circling the house and callin' for

Junior, Mama Lacey told everybody to sit still. But Junior jumped up and was at the front door before Mama Lacey's words died off. "what y'all want out there." He yelled at the top of his voice. "Git outta here, you on private property." The hoof beats slowed down but never stopped circling. Terry had desperately wanted to go to the door and see what all the commotion was about but the look Mama Lacey gave her froze her to the chair.

Mama Lacey half yelled at Junior. "you stay in here, they know better than to come in here." Terry could see Junior's entire body tensing as he scanned the darkness. Suddenly there was a light like from a torch, it went bright and dim as it moved in front of Junior's figure in the doorway. Then, just a suddenly the light was on the front porch. It clattered and flared up, lighting the doorway. Junior was out the door in a flash and was stomping at the fire when he was hauled off his feet by something Terry couldn't see. Mama Lacey pushed up from the table and went directly outside.

Terry could still feel her eyes and stayed pressed to her chair as she attempted to sort out the sounds of scuffling and raised voices. She made out Mama Lacey saying, "This is gonna stop right now," and the sound of a horse in definite distress. There was more frantic voices and the riders rode away down the road at a good clip. After a silence of almost forever Mama Lacey's voice came out of the darkness. "come out her child." When she adjusted her eyes to the darkness Terry could see Mama Lacey crouched over the crumpled body of Junior. "git in front of him so he can help hisself

up.” Terry half crouched in front of the groaning figure like they were going to play a game of leap frog and Junior reached for her shoulders, painfully made his way to his feet, and followed her slow steps into the house. Mama Lacey took the next two hours nursing cuts and scrapes.

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Sheriff Colter tried to calm his nerves the best way he knew how. The jar of moonshine was about half empty at this point and he still felt like ants were crawling up his shirt sleeves. “Nothing good about any of this.” He stated to the container of spirits like they were old drinking buddies. It was his sworn duty to carry out the law as it was passed down. Even if those laws were stretched and pulled to fit a certain want. The sheriff continued to counsel himself and put a good light on what was to be a dark time. He was just doing his job. He’d go get Junior in the morning and lock him up like he was told and the system would take care of the rest. Whatever that was going to be.

This was just another of many times when the law works for those in power and sweeps the rest of the people out the back door like so much dust and dirt. What they could want with that land was beyond the sheriff’s comprehension. Beyond the hard piece the house sat on , the rest of it was soft bog. Mushy ground that will barely support the moss that grows over it

like a blanket. Any trees that start up there once they get so big find out there's nothing to hold onto and they just lay over. What use could a piece of land like that be? It did belong to Mama Lacey fair and full. It was deeded to her daddy way back before the Civil War most probably because they knew it would never amount to anything.

As a young boy, Sheriff Colter and his friends would roam the soft ground playing kick games with the big mushrooms that sprouted everywhere in the late summer. They would lay quiet on their bellies in the taller grass and watch Mama Lacey walk through and sample the toadstools and collect some of them into a basket. She was always the one folks went to when they were too sick for the man that passed as the doctor in their parts. He must have been about eight the first time they took him to see her. He could still remember the raging fever that made his little body feel like it was on fire.

They took him over in the wagon. Mama Lacey came out and took his hands and rubbed them and turned them face up and face down, all the while looking into his eyes with her stare that can reach places deep inside you. The sheriff's parents spoke to Mama Lacey with a level of respect not given to most black people. "We've tried just about everything for him and he just keeps getting worse by the day." Mama Lacey never took her eyes off him as she listened to his mother and father. The sheriff could still remember to this day that her touch was warm even in his inflamed condition.

Mama Lacey reached into the pocket of her apron and pulled out a piece of tree branch. He could tell it was from some kind of willow tree because that was his father's choice of switch used to give him and his brothers a tanning when they got into trouble. "You chew that skin off and you'll start to feel better soon." Mama Lacey said to him. She finally released him from her gaze and gave a few more pieces of the switch tree to his mother. "boil this down to a light brown tea and see that the boy drinks it all, no matter how he complains about the taste. You might add a little molasses to make it easier for him." Mama Lacey said to his nodding mother. It was about the most bitter thing he had ever tasted, but it sure worked the magic.

To this day folks still go down the dirt road to her house seeking remedies for what ails them. Most times she greets them with her strong look, and sometimes her round face will almost wrinkle into a smile for the little ones. Sheriff Colter was picturing all those years ago and that half-smile when without his control the mental image changed to the fiery look Mama Lacey gave him when he spoke of locking up Junior. She had to know he was just doing his job. She knows most everything.

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Mama Lacey paced the kitchen. Her soft footsteps were in contrast to the way she thumped the floor with her walking stick. Terry knew that Mama

Lacee only made that sound when things were real bad off. Junior still hadn't come back and the sheriff kept coming around regular looking about. Terry saw him out by the main road this morning when she went out to check on the chickens. She didn't tell Mama Lacee but she also saw some others moving way out on the far end of their land. Out there where the ground gets real soggy during late summer. "That ain't the first time they been out there, pokin' and proddin' at the ground." Terry took some time to sort out how Mama Lacee could have known what she was thinking. In those long seconds all that filled the kitchen was the pounding of her heart in time with the thumps of the walking stick.

All she could offer in response to Mama Lacee's sudden and surprising words was a soft, "Maam?" Mama Lacee still kept up her movement, but Terry could feel her looking. Mama Lacee spoke a little more direct this time. "Time's coming for you to know things, things most folks can't explain and mostly fear." Terry was still fishing for explanations and replied a little more positively. "Yes Maam." This was what she had longed for but now that it was here Terry wasn't so sure she was ready. The way Mama Lacee was speaking made Terry feel warm and jumpy. The air in the room felt thick and wet. Mama Lacee walked over to the fireplace and threw something from her apron pocket into the fire. It gave off a smell like sugar burning. Terry watched the little woman's body stretch and straighten as she filled her lungs with the scent.

Mama Lacey spoke to the dancing flames but her words fell directly on Terry's ears. "They want this place." She started. "Got big plans for it. Plans that don't include as at all. Working up some kind of sham of a reason to walk roughshod over folks. Sheriff'll be here soon. Anything they put on paper don't make it right. This place been in our family since before the Civil War. The only reason they give it to us then was because nobody else wanted it till now." The smell was gone but Terry could still taste the burnt sugar in the back of her throat. She swallowed hard a couple of times to push the taste on down but it was to no avail. It was then she started to see the sparkles dance in the air in front of her eyes. Terry gave up on trying to make sense of any of this. The sparkles grew larger until they started to block her view of the rest of the kitchen.

Mama Lacey continued to speak, but from what she could make out of the haze Terry couldn't see her mouth moving as the words flowed into her mind. "These things you'll learn come from a time way off. They been done this way since time was measured. You just bend the will of the earth and the stars to find the answers. It won't all come to you at once and some of it can lay heavy on you." Terry reached out for something to tell her this was really happening. Now it seemed the sparkles were coming from Mama Lacey. Her jaw felt as if it were wired shut as she started to ask Mama Lacey what was happening. Mama Lacey's voice came again without any lip movement. "I was scared too back then when they brought me in. I couldn't git a hold of back or forth or up or down for awhile. It all swirled into my head like the

way water coils down a drain.”

Terry made to reach for the knife she had earlier been using to peel potatoes and the dancing sparkles made it almost move in her vision. She only succeeded in pushing over the edge of the table and it clanked to the floor making a sound that was far away. Mama Lacey’s voice was softer than Terry ever remembered it as she spoke again. “The light’ll play tricks with you till you get used to it bein’ there. Soon you’ll be able to pull it down and bring it back up when you need it. It won’t ever go away tho’, it’s yours from now on. You have to make it do your bidding. Lest it’ll take you over. You use it. Don’t let it use you.” Terry felt the air go thin and she wasn’t sure if she was going to be able to stay upright in the chair for much longer. She laid her head down on the smooth wood of the table and felt the coolness of the surface against her cheek.

There was no way of knowing how long she had been there when Terry suddenly jostled herself awake. The kitchen was just like it had always been but the room seemed brighter. Mama Lacey was gone, the fire had played down and the knife still lay on the floor where it had landed in the dream. It did seem more like a dream to her mind that was still full of unanswered questions. Terry pushed herself away from the table and as she rose to her feet the sparkles danced in the corner of her eye. They were like little children playing hide and seek. Just as she twisted her head to get a full-on look they were gone. Instinctively and without any further thought Terry

addressed the light. “I see you.”

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Justin Powers sat by the window in the paneled study looking over the papers the surveyors delivered this morning. The morning sun washed over him and broke the chill that was his constant partner these days. His normally ruddy complexion was becoming gray and pallid. The houseman, Bell, had just added as much wood as the fireplace would hold without spilling into the room. The wood crackled and spat as the flames licked over them, but it was to no avail. The damn house was as cold as a tomb. The creeping loss of feeling in his fingers made it hard to hold the pages. As he looked out the window, Powers could see the flowers blooming in the garden. The man tending the patch was wearing only a sleeveless t-shirt and short pants. Everywhere he could see from the window view the world was awash in summer, which did nothing at all to explain why it feels like an icebox in his house.

Powers vented his frustration in the usual manner, yelling at his houseman. “Bell, Goddamit, bring me a blanket.” He barked. The papers slipped from his hands and wafted to the floor. Before he could reach down and pick them up there was a flash of black fur as the cat leapt from out of nowhere and sat

on the pile. It stared up at Powers defiantly with its deep green eyes. His first instinct to swat the animal was waylaid by the intense stare that seemed almost human. It was the way his mother would look at him when she knew good and well that he was lying about something. Bell's entrance into the room broke the spell. The cat spun quickly and made for the door before Powers could compose himself. The houseman stood rigid waiting for the blast from his boss.

In the eternity of seconds Bell found the capacity to speak. "Mista Powers, I know you told me to get rid of that cat but this is the first time I seen him since that night. It's like he disappears or somethin', I'm gonna get everybody in this house on findin' him..." Bell held out the blanket as he made his statement. Powers reached out with his numb fingers and welcomed the warmth of the cover. He found himself at a loss for words with his battle against the cold. "Alright Bell, you do that." Powers almost muttered as he nestled under the blanket. Bell took the soft reply as his cue to exit and turned on his heels. As he made it into the hallway he yelled to all in earshot. "Everybody stop what you doin' RIGHT NOW and find that cat."

Powers reflected on the way the cat had stared him down. It was the same glare mother would give when she knew good and well who raided the cookie tin, one that dripped with the unspoken words of condemnation. Those times were long past but there was the same feeling of being bare and exposed. He could never hide his guilt from her piercing eyes. She was

always there in those moments when the crumbs were fresh in his pocket. His guilt sealed by the fading aroma of his ill-gotten gains. The houseman's railings in the background brought Powers back to the present. There were scurrying noise on the floor above him, but somehow Justin Powers knew all the activity would be in vain.

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Sheriff Colter found the judge in his usual office, the back table at the tavern. The judge looked up at him with his constant scowl and made a gesture toward the only other chair at the table. "I suppose you come to tell me you done found Junior." He spat out in the sheriff's direction. Sheriff Colter shook his head and was about to update the judge when he was cut short. "I don't want to hear nothin' but that you done what you was told. How hard is it to find a buck as big as Junior, people don't just disappear off the face of the earth..." the sheriff banged his fist on the table to halt the judge's tirade. The sudden thud left the judge with his mouth agape and his eyes wide. "I done looked in every cornfield, hedgerow, chicken house, and outhouse in this county. If Junior is anywhere here he may as well be invisible. Everybody breathin' down my neck to find him, don't find him and he just flat aint nowhere to be seen." The sheriff announced through his clenched teeth. "If any of you think you can do better I Damn sho' would like y'all to take over."

The sheriff's proclamation seemed to ease the scowl on the judge's features. The judge leaned back in his chair and swirled the liquid in his glass. He started to speak in a tone that was much more even. "Folks mighty worked up over this and everybody is gettin' jumpy. The sooner this all blows over the better. I don't like it any more than you do. Just passing on the heat." The words had the air of an apology and the sheriff offered his reply. "This whole thing got a bad smell to it, nothin' about it feels right. Those papers talk about a foreclosure. Makes not a bit of sense that someone would want that land. Ain't much more than a swamp with some dry patches." He dropped his shoulders as he unloaded the words. His face that could at times be described as boyish showed the outright strain of a man under siege.

The judge pondered the sheriff's revelation, and in a low voice offered. "It ain't what's on it. What they're after you can't see." The judge took a long pull on his drink. "It's best we don't dwell too much on what we have to do. There are people way above us that want this done. My suggestion is we do it and get it over with." With his last word the judge threw back the remaining liquid in his glass. The rest of the patrons carried on noisily as the pair at the table sat frozen. Finally, the sheriff rose and ambled out of the tavern.

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Terry was having her first lesson, she stood at the sink close enough to Mama Lacey to feel the heat emanate from the figure that was at least a head shorter. Everyone around was always remarking about how Terry was taking on height like a grapevine reaching for the sky. Mama Lacey was matter-of-fact when she spoke, but her voice didn't have its usual edge. "We need to see that Junior's alright. You done seen me do it enough times to know how. Just stay yo' mind to what it is you searchin' for and it'll be there." The pump handle gave a low creak as the water was brought up from the well into the pan in the sink. In her nervousness Terry jerked at the handle and the water gushed forth setting the rest of the contents in the pan into a sloshing frenzy. She wasn't sure to let the water settle on its own which would take some good time given the splashing she had caused, or to attempt some other way when Mama Lacey concentrated on the pan and the water swayed a few more lazy beats and settled down.

Terry could see her eyes large and white as she leaned forward over the liquid mirror. She dipped a single finger into the pan and started a slow twirl that spiraled her image away. She almost felt that her mouth would be too dry to follow the next step she had witnessed over and over. Terry ran her tongue into the well in her lower jaw and brought forth what she found. She spat softly into the water as she lifted her finger free. Her spittle fanned out in the current and smoothed the center of the water. It was foggy where she

was seeing, like it was very early morning. There was Junior. He had his back turned, but there was no mistaking. The others gathered before him were just blurs in the picture. Just as Junior was about to turn as if he heard a voice the image faded to gray and her wide eyes came back into view. “It’s gone.” She said to her puzzled image. Mama Lacey broke Terry’s wondering streak. “It gave you no more than you asked it.”

Terry stood before the sink as Mama Lacey’s progress out of the kitchen came to her in softer and softer thumps of the stick on the wooden floor. How was she supposed to know what to ask? She did only want to know if Junior was alright. A lot was going on that she couldn’t figure. The air felt funny. Like there was some kind of static floating on the breeze. What was she supposed to make of it? The water in the pan continued to reflect only her scrunched brow. It didn’t at all look like Mama Lacey was going to sit her down and lay it out. She was more few with her words lately than ever before. “Make sure you get them ‘tatoes done.” Mama Lacey voice came from the other room as if she was watching Terry stand dumbstruck. “Yes Maam.” Terry replied obediently as she went to her everyday tasks. She knew what to do with a potato.

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Sheriff Colter stood in the morning mist. He had been at his vantage point for about two hours. The dogs in the distance that started to yelp when he made it to the clearing by moonlight had started to quiet down. It was his job to bring in Junior. He was trying to justify his actions to the sour taste that welled in the back of his throat. Over the last two days he had walked all the old paths he remembered as a young kid when there was time for play. It was their version of hide and seek to ramble along the narrow paths that criss-crossed the woods. From time to time one of them would get lost and it was just another level of discovery instead of a moment of panic. As he made his way these days it was hard to imagine how he could have thought it was fun to walk blindly down paths that lead to points unknown.

It was yesterday that the one path he almost chose not to take brought him to the place where he was standing now, the brush seemed almost too thick for a person to pass but on close inspection there were signs of passage. There were small branches broken away at a height too tall for foraging animals. The yelping of the dogs in the near distance made him pause and for some reason he knew he was at the right place. The clearing that he could make out through the underbrush held a small shack with two tents nearby. Colter stood his ground for the better part of an hour and took note that the dogs seemed to be settling down the longer he stayed in place.

At this stage his plan he worked out over the evening was going OK. The mist started to fade back with the coming morning sun, and the first stirring

made the hairs on the backs of his hands stand at attention. It was that black gal that Junior favored, she gathered up a couple of pieces of wood and turned to scan the area in his direction. Her dark skin was in direct contrast to the white gown she wore, making her stand out even more in the half light. She went back into the shack and Colter pushed his plan forward. The two hours of inaction made his legs less than cooperative as he lunged from the thicket. The dogs went back to their full-scale bawling as he closed the distance, pulling his pistol as he progressed. The first person to stick their head out of the tent was greeted with the business end of the barrel. "You git back in there and stay till I tell you to come out." The sheriff hissed at the wide-eyed face.

He didn't look back to see if they complied as he concentrated on getting inside the shack and maintaining his element of surprise. Colter hit the door with his shoulder and the wooden latch splintered away. He was inside and waving his revolver before the startled occupants could make any move. There were two others besides Junior and the black gal. They were facing the door and stood stark still with their eyes darting between the sheriff and Junior who was facing with his back to the door. "Alright Junior, let's don't make this messy. There's other folks to consider should you try something." The sheriff trained his revolver momentarily on each of the others to make his point. Junior slowly came around and met the sheriff's gaze. He had the same intense stare as Mama Lacey, but there wasn't the fire she laid on a body. "You comin' outta here with me now." the sheriff spoke before he got

locked into the deep well of Junior's eyes.

The others moved back to the far wall of the shack as the sheriff closed in on Junior. The black gal took a half-step forward as the sheriff leveled the revolver towards Junior's chest. "You come here." The sheriff commanded the black gal with his eyes as he kept his aim on Junior. She stepped forward almost defiantly. She was about to speak when the sheriff cut her words off. "Don't nobody talk in here but me." He fumbled the handcuffs from his belt and thrust them in the black gal's direction. "Put one end on you and the other on Junior, NOW!" the sheriff continued to bark out his words lest he give away the nervousness that was just below the surface. The black gal never took her eyes off the sheriff as she closed the metal bracelet around her wrist and attached herself to Junior.

"Now that I don't have to worry about you so much I'm gonna put this down but not away." The sheriff dropped his eyes to the revolver to make his point. Junior never acknowledged in any way, just continued to duel with the sheriff with his eyes. "The three of us gonna leave here peacefully and soon as I see fit we'll let her go." Junior and the black gal exchanged a long look and he turned back to the sheriff and nodded agreement.

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Justin Powers tried to feel victorious when he hung up the phone. Finally, the sheriff had hauled in Junior and he could go forth with his plan. There was a time when things going his way gave him a warm feeling all over. Those days seemed far in the distance as he continued to try and shake off the chill that was his constant companion. He had walked out onto the back porch where the late morning sun was strongest and the wind that should have been a warm breeze was like a knife blade threatening to slice the skin from his bones. It was all he could do to make it back into the house without having to call Bell to his aid. Now as he sat at the desk fighting down the tremors, the whiskey decanter held half as much of the brown liquid as when Bell set it before him this morning.

Powers attempted to reach for the phone and his disobedient hands instead sent the tall black unit tumbling. The ensuing fall started the decanter on a wobbling path that that was in no way corrected by Powers' efforts to stabilize it. His twitching grasp fell short once again and the bottle finished its dance by crashing down onto the desk in his direction, sending the cut glass stopper and the better part of the remaining contents into his lap. Rage and frustration caused his ruddy face to flare bright red as he screamed for the houseman.

Bell was Johnny-on-the-spot, but it seemed too late for Justin Powers. Bell pleaded with him to speak and tell him what was wrong, and what he should do. Powers could only stare blankly in return as all his faculties failed him in his effort to respond. He knew what he wanted to say, but the words were only in his mind, as his mouth refused to open and speak. He could only watch detached as bell half-lifted him from the chair at his desk and placed him on the couch by the fireplace. He could hear Bell speaking, but his voice came from a place far removed. Bell turned and called for assistance and the cook came into the room with her eyes wide in wonder at the frozen figure on the couch. Powers could hear Bell tell the woman to stay there until he could go get help. She sat on the stool by the door and looked warily from Powers to the door through which she could make her escape if things got any stranger. The last thing Powers could recall before he fell into what could be best described as a light coma, was the cat come into the room and sit next to the cook. She instinctively reached out and petted the sleek black feline and he moved close and rubbed his head against her leg, all the while never taking his fierce green eyes off Powers.

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The judge didn't sound at all pleased this morning when sheriff Colter rang him up to give him the news. The sheriff had at least expected some kind of relief in the judge's voice but instead the judge spoke as if Colter was telling him the flood was on the way. "All right, All right." He snapped into the

sheriff's ear. "you just sit tight and make damn sure nothin' happens to him. Things been having a way of going on their own lately." The sheriff didn't quite know what to make of the judge's statement so he remained mute on the line. The crackle of the connection dominated all sound for a long minute. "there's some things I gotta do." The judge said more to himself than the sheriff on the other end. It had the sound of dread that made the sheriff's nerves tingle.

Colter listened to the sounds of Junior rustling around in his cell. He hadn't spoken more than ten words since being brought in. Colter had let the black gal loose when they got clear of the woods yesterday morning. She and Junior had put their heads together in an embrace and they exchanged sounds that could have been words but the sheriff couldn't make them out. She went away from them without looking back but even now the sheriff had the feeling that she was watching. There wasn't any commotion from the locals about Junior and that was all the more unnerving. He had expected some noise and the quiet was downright unsettling. Colter swung his chair away from the desk and moved slowly towards the cell area.

Junior was sitting with his back to the cell door by the small window. The light rays fell in on his front, so his back view was one of a dark outline. Colter could see his hands and he was holding that rock. It wasn't big enough to be an escape aid, so Colter hadn't taken it away from him. Junior rolled the stone between his hands like he was kneading dough. He seemed

to be listening to a far off sound. Colter could almost swear he could see the rock sparkle, but he reasoned it away as the sun playing on the stone as it twirled in Junior's hands.

There was something so private about the moment that Colter felt he was spying. Junior turned in Colter's direction as if he knew he was there all along. His eyes had that fire, not the heat that Mama Lacey puts on you when she stares you down. His was more a smoldering thing. Colter was almost startled when Junior spoke and dashed away the silence. "Y'all plan on keepin' me in here forever?" The question was flat and direct.

Colter fell into his nervous habit of rubbing his neck as he searched for an answer. Since he really didn't know any more about the plan besides he was to arrest Junior, Colter shifted his feet as he attempted to change the subject by answering Junior's question with a question. "You getting' hungry, I can come up with something for you?" Junior wasn't swayed by the vain effort. He repeated his question in the same measure, "Y'all plan on keepin' me in here forever?" Colter felt his neck flush as he rubbed it even harder. He took the only recourse he had and pretended as if they were having a conversation. "I'll go see what I can find. You ain't had nothin' all day." Colter almost bolted from the cell room as he felt Junior staring him down in his retreat.

Instead of looking for food, Colter left the jail and headed for the tavern where he knew the judge would be. He knew he didn't have to give Junior

any answers but he sure wanted some of the buzzing in his head to stop. Maybe if he knew a little more about what was on the way he could feel a little less like the world was about to turn sideways. The judge was two and a half sheets to the wind when Colter sat down at the table. His words came out slow and syrupy when the judge gathered himself enough to speak. “you look a mite frazzled sheriff.” The judge belched at the last word. He didn’t wait for the sheriff to reply to his observation. He continued to speak, more in general than directly to the sheriff. “Must be feeling what the rest of us are feeling. Like something ugly’s about to happen.”

Colter waited to say anything, expecting the judge to carry on, but the only sound now was the noise from the rest of the patrons as the two sat in awkward silence. The judge emptied his glass before him and waved to the bartender for a refill. “How about for you Sheriff, looks like you could use one or two?” The judge drawled. Colter nodded in agreement and the judge told the barkeep when he arrived with his drink to, “Set something up for our lawman.”

Colter nursed the beer set before him and studied the way the judge had that same far-off look as Junior. He could see the judge’s jaw clinching from time to time like he was bearing down for something painful to come. Just like that, he addressed the fresh shot of whiskey still lolling in the glass. “We all know this ain’t gonna go smooth. No way she’s going to let this pass without a fight...” the judge’s words trailed off as he closed his eyes tightly and

gulped the whisky in a mock toast.

Colter didn't have to do much figuring to come up with who 'she' was. The judge knew just like the rest of this town that Mama Lacey was as powerful a figure in her own right as any man no matter how rich he is. She ain't never stood for some of the foolishness put on around here and her years haven't changed that one bit. That little brown woman could almost make an Oak tree drop to one knee. She could cut you down to size and say three or four words that mean as much as any book on the shelf.

Colter knew what it was like to tuck tail and scoot after words with Mama Lacey. The last time he set foot on that porch she mostly said that we all goin' to regret what'll come to pass. It only made sense to Colter to steer a path around trouble, but Mista Powers is a bullheaded man. He done got his way around here for so long that he can't see clear about what he's up against. Powers is one of the few in this town that calls her a 'conjure woman', sayin' that she is nothing more than some old swamp witch.

Words most others wouldn't even dare think, let alone, let come out of their mouths. Colter wasn't sure just what it was about Mama Lacey, but he was like most reasonable folks that knew she was a force to be reckoned with when she's crossed.

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Terry awoke dog tired. She tried to piece together the string of dreams that had her running from pillar to post. It had all started with Mama Lacey

sending her off with a small pouch to someone she had never seen before but the woman treated Terry like she was an old friend. The woman sorted out the stones and other items in the pouch while Terry wandered through the cabin with all the strange jars full of things she couldn't quite make out. She could only partly remember the words and symbols on the containers. And just like things do in dreams, Terry was by a stream next thing she knew, and this old man waiting on the bank looked around and smiled broadly as Terry approached. Her mind told her it all had to be a dream because she knew in waking life she would never accept the invitation for a walk in the woods with some stranger from parts unknown. She didn't know if they walked for ten minutes or ten hours as the kindly old man rambled on about what nature has to give.

The black cat came in somewhere and shadowed Terry as she tried to make her way out of the woods after the old man made a turn in the path ahead of her and was gone like that. The cat seemed content to follow along almost beside Terry in the thicker underbrush along the path. Terry could hear the water in the distance but it seemed no matter how much ground she covered the river managed to keep the same distance away.

Now, lying awake in the early morning half-light, Terry felt the need to catch her breath and try to make all that she dreamed have some kind of meaning. She could hear Mama Lacee rustling about in the next room and she figured if she lay still and worked on her thoughts, maybe Mama Lacee would think she was still asleep. Terry felt she was supposed to know something from all

that went on in her dream, but everything was happening so fast that she was having trouble sorting it all out. She still couldn't make hide nor hair of seeing Junior.

The image had come and gone so fast that while she was in wonder at being able to do something like that, she knows there is a lot more to it. Junior had jumped like a startled cat as he was spinning around. That could only mean something bad, Junior wasn't one to move quick. She wasn't sure at first if it was just a leftover part of the dreaming when she heard Mama Lacey's voice, the second time she heard her name, Terry knew this was real.

Terry sat up and made ready to answer, but nothing else came. She had expected to be put to task for the day's work. Now there was only silence from the other room, none of the stirring from before. Terry moved from her cot towards the door with her every nerve on end. Her nightshirt rustled softly with each step. In the dim light, it was hard to make out the small figure in the rocker. Mama Lacey looked tucked into the knitted afghan draped over the back of the chair.

She didn't say anything as Terry advanced into the room, only rocked the chair slightly forward, causing the floor boards to lightly moan. Mama Lacey was wearing the apron she always had on, but there were none of the small bulges that hinted at things within. Her hands were folded in her lap and her eyes were just this side of closed. It wasn't usual that Terry would speak before spoken to but she found herself asking, "Mama Lacey, you OK?"

Terry knelt as she made the inquiry.

Mama Lacey's eyelids rose a tad as she responded, "I'm restin', you take care of things and go see Junior. Give him this." Mama Lacey lifted her hands from her lap just high enough for Terry to see the small pouch. Terry plucked the tiny bag from its resting place just as the dogs picked up a racket. As Terry swiveled her head away towards the commotion outside and back to Mama Lacey, her lids had closed. Mama Lacey gave no notice at all to the yelping and the sound of steps on the wooden porch.

Terry grabbed the shawl off the hook by the door as she went towards the front door. Before she could close the gap, there was a hard knock. The sharp sound made her break stride and almost freeze in position, but her next two strides put her at the door as the sheriff's voice rang out. "This is the sheriff here. Need to talk to Mama Lacey." Terry swung the door open just enough to stick her head out and announce. "She restin'." Terry declared in a loud whisper.

The sheriff reared back from the door and lowered his voice. "You tell Mama Lacey I got Junior down at the jail pendin' judgment. Tell her we need to talk soon, you hear me?" Terry didn't answer the sheriff, just nodded her head and pushed the door back shut. Terry braced her back against the door and the sound of the sheriff retreating. Still more to put together.

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The Powers house was not the same without the roaring voice of its owner crashing against the walls. Bell found himself talking in almost whispers to the rest of the staff as he attempted to retain normalcy after Mista Powers falling ill and such. The doctor had come as quick as Bell had summoned him, he did a lot of looking, and some probing as he assessed the non-responsive patient. He made his findings known in a voice that sounded like he couldn't believe what he was seeing. "Just don't know what to make of it. Last I saw him he was healthy as a horse. No reason I can see for it." The doctor hadn't said when or if he was going to snap back. Only advised Bell to do what he could to make sure Mista Powers got some something to eat, which lately amounted to anything that could be juiced down and ladled into his slack mouth.

Bell had taken to glaring down any questioners about Mista Powers' condition, mostly to keep from saying that he had no earthly idea what was going on. He only knew that things had to be taken care of around here lest this place would fall to pieces left to young Mista Powers. He came in here yesterday and peeped at his stiff daddy laying there, and ran like a little child that seen the boogey man. Aint nobody round here seen the boy since and don't much seem like anybody misses him. Outside of the fact that he's Mista Powers' flesh and blood, they aint much good about him. He been a bad seed since he was a little thing. Bell tucked the blanket in around Mista Powers. It was just a reflex action since there was no movement from beneath to ruffle the covers.

Bell just knew that the last words he heard were “Damn it’s cold in here.” Getting no return for his efforts, Bell had no way of knowing if he was helping. He did know that should Mista Powers break loose of this, everything better be right around here. Bell left the still form and went about getting folks to task. The house staff popped to work in quick order.

Bell almost didn’t hear the knocking at the door as he bellowed directions to everyone in earshot. The knocking had become more insistent by the time Bell made it to the door. He recognized the two men from a recent visit to see Mista Powers. They ushered themselves in and had made it to the parlor door when Bell stepped into their path. “I’m sorry sirs, but Mista Powers is under doctor’s care and can’t see anybody. They aint sure what he got or who can catch it so they don’t want him to see anybody for now.” Bell stated with all the authority he could muster. It seemed that his proclamation about something possibly contagious cooled their heels.

The taller of the two men scratched his head and looked over Bell’s shoulder as if Powers would appear if he waited long enough. Bell stood his ground and the smaller man broke the stalemate. “If that’s the case is there anyone else here we can speak with.” The man’s words came out like he was talking to a small child. Bell was on his own edge with all going on and his reply was short and matter-of-fact. “I’m all you get today.” He looked from one man to the other. They turned to face each other and seemed to finally

accept Bell's resolve. "You gentlemen might want to talk to the judge, you'll find him at the usual place." Bell formed his words as if they were already out the door.

With the two men clear of the house Bell took a minute to try and figure out where this world was going. He knew better than to direct the men towards young Mista Powers. That boy has no idea about the business of this place. Left to him, the whole house could come crashing down around their ears. Bell crept into the parlor as if he might disturb the still form under the blanket. Matty from the kitchen was sitting in the chair next to Mista Powers. She looked up with her big wide eyes shining from her dark face and asked. "Is he ever gonna do anything but that?" Matty was referring to the darting of his eyes from time to time. She turned back to Mista Powers before Bell could answer as if she might miss a movement by not keeping watch. Bell didn't have an answer and could only shake his head. He spoke more to himself than Matty as he proclaimed. "Lord I wish I knew, 'bout now I don't think anybody can say."

Bell watched as Matty seemed to muster up her courage and reached. She laid her hand tentatively on Mista Powers' shoulder as if she was afraid it would wake him. "It ain't right for a body to be that cold is it?" Matty asked without looking back. "I can feel it right thru this here blanket." She went on. Matty smoothed her hand over the blanket for the length of Mista Powers' arm and swiftly pulled away like she came up on a snake in the

brush. She rose quickly and made for the door, all the while shaking her head. Bell went to the still figure that was once so full of fire and life. He found himself talking as if they were having a conversation. “You really need to come on out of there and keep this place from fallin’ apart.”

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Terry made her way towards town with the small bag Mama Lacee had given her for Junior tucked down in the basket of biscuits. It wasn't quite light this morning when Terry finished her dough preparations and set the pan into the cook stove, the rest of her morning chores went easier with the smell of the biscuits coming into their own filling the air. There really wasn't much to do with Junior gone and since Mama Lacee didn't stir from her chair but once a day to take care of her business. Somehow, Terry always seemed to know just what needed to be done even before her feet hit the floor.

As she made her way down the street toward the jail, Terry noticed that some people were paying her a lot more attention than they most often would. It was then she picked up on the extra set of footsteps matching hers, only heavier. Her first impulse to speed up was put aside by the quicker pace of the heavier steps and next thing he was standing in front of her. It was Mista Power's boy. He was looking real crazy about the eyes and his hair was standing up on his head. When he leaned in close to speak Terry got a

big whiff of alcohol. How could somebody be taking in that much drink this early in the day?

Young Powers rolled his eyes as he made like he was going to speak. Terry could do nothing but hold her ground. She fixed the wild-eyed man with her steady gaze. His darting eyes slowed down as Terry concentrated, he finally spoke but it was coming out like syrup. “What you got in there.” He drawled out as he reached for the basket. Terry still stood her ground but pulled back the basket just far enough to keep it from his grasp. “Must be somethin’ good from the smell of it.” His breath was full on drunk as he loomed over Terry.

The folks standing around watching seemed to be holding their breath waiting on the next move by either of the two. Terry felt comfortable with holding her place while young Mista Powers had started to waver from side to side. Seems he needed to do something before he lost his balance and he made a renewed reach for the basket. Terry waited for the last second and pulled the basket away just before his hand made contact, which left him with nothing to stop his motion. He stumbled and fell half into the street. Terry shifted around as he went down to keep track of him and what else he might do.

As he rolled over to upright himself his face was as red as fire and he was spewing some of the most awful words when the sheriff appeared and stepped between them. The sheriff didn’t say anything, just reached down and gathered up young Mista Powers, who was no longer screaming but still

making ugly sounds. The two men exchanged some close words that Terry couldn't make out and then the sheriff looked back over his shoulder and made a motion to shoo Terry away.

Terry took her leave and made quick steps toward the jail and her original task. When she got there, the door was ajar and she went right on in. Junior rose from the bench in his cell when Terry came into view. At first he looked like he was glad to see her, then he clouded over into his usual self. His strong voice bounced off the brick walls as he spoke. "This ain't no place for a child." He came over to the bars drawn by the smell of the biscuits. Terry pulled the cover towel away and Junior helped himself without another word. He wolfed down the first biscuit and as he took his time with the second one he offered thanks on his own way. "You make these?" Terry nodded. "They almost as good as Mama Lacey's." He grunted out.

As Junior worked on his third biscuit Terry fished down in the basket and produced the pouch. He stopped chewing long enough to take the small bag and roll it in his fingers, then tuck it into his waistband. Junior made a final reach for the basket and scooped up the towel with the remaining biscuits. He gave Terry a half-smile as he said almost softly. "You betta git on home now. They's a lot for you to git done since you runnin' things. I'm gonna be just fine." Terry was light on her feet as she left the jail and went in the opposite direction of her earlier run-in.

Mamma Lacey was still in her chair when Terry made it back to the house. There was a sign of her movement by the glass at the sink. Other than that,

the house was as Terry left it. She tried to clear her head by setting to the simple tasks of daily cleaning. Terry took the glass from the sink board, and was drawing water to fill it for a rinsing when the image popped up. The big house was all still except for the pacing black man that Terry didn't recognize. He went from one end of the room to the other, all the while looking across at something Terry couldn't see.

She did recognize the next person to come into view. It was Young Mista Powers. He looked as crazed as when Terry had encountered him earlier. The two men had words that didn't look anything like pleasant. Young Mista Powers kept pointing at whatever it was she couldn't see. The black man stood his ground as Young Mista Powers carried on, finally throwing up his hands and almost hitting the wild eyed person before him. Young Mista Powers backed out of the range pointing his finger like he wished it was a gun. Terry tried to treat the viewing as something she might have seen looking out a window, but her mind added it to the puzzle.

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Sheriff Colter had done his best to calm down young Powers. The commotion of his yelling and screaming, and the folks rushing over to see what was going on, drew the sheriff from his chair where he was pondering the fate of his prisoner. It did his mind no good at all to make it up the street only to find young Powers stinking drunk first thing in the morning, cussing

all to be damned at the girl from Mama Lacey's house. Colter didn't know what to figure as to how young Powers was getting up from the curb while the girl eyed him like a watch dog. She didn't seem none too put out by all his railings like most young people would. Just kept her eyes locked on him as he staggered to his feet.

All the while he tried to smooth over the situation and send the girl on her way, young Powers was railing. "She pushed me sheriff. ' he slurred. "You ought to lock her up right now, kid or not. Aint right for them people to be assaultin' white folks..." Colter placed his hand in the middle of young Powers' chest as much to steady him as to shut off his words. The move had the desired effect and while young Powers was re-grouping, Colter flashed a look over his shoulder and with a nod of his head sent the girl moving.

Young powers mumbled on and on as the sheriff ushered him down the street and into the tavern, which was the last place he needed to be, but given that his crowd made a home in the place, it seemed the most likely spot to let him cool off. Colter made his way back to the jail expecting to see the girl from Mama Lacey's house visiting with Junior. There was only the usual silence as he came in, the only hint of a visitor was the smell of biscuits in the air. It unnerved Colter to have a prisoner as quiet as a cat. Most folks spend their entire time in lock-up moaning and crying about how things are all wrong and how innocent they are. Junior just seemed content to bide his time, like he was waiting on a special moment.

Something was going to have to happen soon. There's no way they can justify holding Junior without formal charges, since for some reason or the other Mister Powers is not coming forward. The Judge was being awful murky about what comes next. Seems for real that nobody knows.

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Mama Lacey was in the kitchen when Terry made it back to the house. She looked fair and had a lot more color than the last few days. Terry went about her regular chores, all the while she did her best to look over Mama Lacey, as much for her own peace of mind as to make sure the little figure at the table was going to be with them. Terry didn't want to put her mind to thinking about life without Mama Lacey. She knew enough to know that time comes for all to pass over, but it can't happen at a time like this.

Her mulling was cut short by Mama Lacey's request. "Think I might like to have me a biscuit, and some sorghum..." though she looked small and frail, her voice still carried. Before Terry could respond with a 'Yes Maam', Mama Lacey went on. "Time's getting' short, you and me both know ain't nothin' forever. You movin' around here sizin' me up like I'm gonna blow away like the dust on a jug. Whenever it comes, yo' fussin' ain't gonna stop the sun from settin'". Terry made her way to the chair across from Mama Lacey as she spoke. Terry watched as her weathered fingers separated small

pieces of the biscuit and roll it thru the sorghum, it appeared she more wanted something to do than to eat, since little of the mixture made it from the saucer to her mouth.

Mama Lacey spoke of things that she told Terry, 'will make sense down the road'. How most of the learning will come in waves, "You at first won't know what it is, but you'll feel it settle in. Sometimes it's words, other times it's pictures." Mama Lacey said by way of explanation. "You'll get it all sorted out and start to make it work for you. But you can't let it get away from you. Biggest part of knowing is knowing what to know." As suddenly as she started talking, Mama Lacey fell silent and set to work on devouring the biscuit. Terry felt pleased as she watched Mama Lacey make short work of the collection on the saucer, appetite was the sign of good health.

All the while Mama Lacey ate her biscuit thoughts flooded into Terry's head. Thoughts that normally only come when you're having words with someone, not when the only sounds to be heard are coming from the chickens in the coop out back. Terry could only think of bubbles slowly rising to the surface of a pond from some unseen source. Didn't as much seem like the thoughts were coming from Mama Lacey but from all over at once. Like the full sunshine of a summer afternoon that warms you on all sides at once. "You just let 'em come thru, get what you need." Mama Lacey said as she licked the remnants of the biscuit-sorghum mix from her fingers.

Terry could only nod in response and reflexively take the saucer to the sink for a cleaning. Mama Lacey's voice sounded far away as she went on.

“When I was yo’ age folks didn’t know what to make of it so they acted like it wasn’t there. But I knew it was about. I could feel it on the wind. See it in the clouds. Couldn’t tell nobody then cause they didn’t want to hear it. Just left to me to deal with it. Wasn’t any answers then like they ain’t none now, it just what it is. Had to be here long before us to be so strong every day. I took to callin’ it a shawl, cause it warmed me so.”

Terry watched as Mama Lacey's eyes lit up with their normal fire as she recounted her own young days, all this long time she spent in that chair it was like she didn't want to even open them. Mama Lacey ran her hand over the surface of the table while she went on. “You gonna see lots more than you can do anything about. Over time I figured out how to strain out what was for me to do. It's a pot that always at the point of boiling over lest you stir it or turn down the fire.”

The silence when she stopped speaking was so thick you could slice it with a knife. Terry did her best to keep her breathing even to hide the jitters running up and down her back. “I know you scared and probably don't want no part of all this but it like a birthmark, something you learn to get along with.”

Terry could feel Mama Lacey's eyes as she counseled her but she didn't dare look up lest she start to cry. Mama Lacey pushed back from the table and reached for her stick. Terry hustled around to give her an arm up, all the

while concentrating on the floor boards.

After helping Mama Lacey get settled back into her chair, Terry went out onto the back stoop to take in some air and try to figure out with all she's heard what goes where. She laid her head on her knees and wished for a short time to rest without the voices calling out. The sun had taken its glare to the far side of the house, so her spot was almost cool. Just the place for a weary mind to get some ease.

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Sheriff Colter was surprised to find the judge in his office instead of his usual table at the saloon. This whole situation was eating a hole in his conscience and hopefully there was a way to get his point across. The judge made a gesture of putting away the whiskey bottle from atop his desk to a drawer and moved the glass with the shot waiting to the side as the sheriff sat down. Colter watched as the man's jaw clenched and released like a pendulum on a clock. "I guess you come over here to tell me what to do like the rest of them." The judge almost spat out the words. "everybody's got the answers to this mess and aint none of them worth a shit."

Colter looked closer and it was easy to see as well as smell that the judge was more than a little into that bottle. The judge continued his tirade as if Colter only stopped by to hear him talk. "There aint a damn thing I can do

without Powers. He's got this all tied up and it'll take him to sort it out. I can't go ruling on what I think he wants, and its for damn sure he can't tell nobody nothing. He may as well be a sack of potatoes laying on that couch for what its worth. Doctors don't know how he got that way, let alone how to fix him..." The judge reached for the glass and studied it for a moment before emptying the contents. After a hard swallow, he fixed his bleary eyes directly on the sheriff and went on with his speech.

"Its gonna get out anyway so you might as well hear it straight, Justin Powers is afflicted with something that nobody can explain. His houseman says he just found him stiff and cold at his desk and there hasn't been much more than basic signs of life since then. Doctors call it some kind of coma, I got my own ideas but they're as strange as this whole mess." The judge stopped short of any explanation and just stared at the empty glass before him. He sat upright in his chair as if to look more official. "It's to me to make the judgment on Justin Power's competence and turn over the reins to his son. We both know what a mess that could be. That boy's a loose cannon full of powder. There aint no way to know how this is going to turn out, but for now it don't look good. You have to sit tight just like the rest of us and ride this out. I'll handle any questions about why Junior's still in jail." The judge signaled the end of the one-sided conversation by reaching down in the drawer and producing the bottle of whisky.

Sheriff Colter made his way back towards the jail telling himself this was all

gonna iron out. All the signs he saw as he closed in on the jail told him totally different. There were three of them on the front step. Young Powers' bunch. They were carrying on like there was some kind of party under way. If they were supposed to be lookouts they were doing a poor job. As he got closer, Colter could hear the all too familiar ravings of young Powers. His words were capped off by the clanging of metal on metal.

Colter took the two outside figures of the trio by the shoulder and flung them each in an opposite direction to the door they were facing and shoved the third one forward into the room and onto his face. They all smelled like they were wearing as much whiskey as they had drank. Young Powers was wielding a crowbar against the lock on the cell holding Junior, the only way into the cell since the keys were hanging on the sheriff's belt. Junior was back against the far wall of the cell boring his eyes into the raging fool swinging the bar to no avail. The chill wind blew in from the open door and swirled around inside. It made no sense at all but Colter could only watch as the wind seemed to hit young Powers in the back and make him drop the crow bar and hang onto the bars like a lightning bolt had just passed out the bottom of his shoes.

As young Powers wrenched himself loose of the cell bars and wheeled around in the sheriff's direction, his ashen face registered shock, fear, and total bewilderment. The figure on the floor was as frozen in wonder as the sheriff himself. The prone man's wide eyes flashed back and forth between the sheriff and young Powers. The remaining pair from outside was just

crowding into the doorway to see what was going on as young Powers gathered himself enough to make his hasty exit that almost bowled the pair over.

Junior went back to his seat on the cot as if nothing had happened. He gave Colter one of his flat stares before turning back to the window above him. All the while, he rolled the small pouch in his right hand. Colter figured he might be able to get a little light on what just happened if Junior would decide to talk, but that was highly unlikely. The sheriff could account for less than a dozen words from his prisoner. Maybe he didn't really want to know.

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It all started in that fuzzy area where you not sure if you sleep or awake. Terry could hear the voices, they carried on in a way that makes you know there's trouble somewhere around. At first, it was like they were standing just the other side of the wall next to her sleeping pallet. Goin' on about how they was gonna finish what they started. The words, 'That Damn Junior', made Terry know why she was hearing this. One voice for sure rang true to her ears, it was young Mista Powers. His was the sharpest and hardest of all the voices.

The voices went quiet as Terry rolled toward the wall and forced her eyes open. In the early morning light the crickets chirping was the only sound she could detect. She sat upright, checking again to see if she missed something.

There had to be the sound of horses and footsteps to go with the voices. But there was nothing. Terry waited for a long minute in hopes that this morning would sort itself out. The voices could have just been a dream and no more but how was she to know? She tuned her ears for any sound that Mama Lacey might be stirring, still there was only the crickets.

There were days lately when Terry felt she lived in the house all by herself. What with Junior in jail and Mama Lacey spending most all her time in that chair it felt lonesome. There were things to do to keep busy, but it felt like the days pull themselves along. She padded on her bare feet from the pallet to the next room where Mama Lacey was as still as always. The rise and fall of her small chest was about as much movement as Terry could detect. She was about to clear the doorway when Mama Lacey spoke. "Aint no need to tip around in here, I'm more awake than you know. You the one been sleepin' late." Terry automatically answered the surprise words with, "Yes Maam". It felt like the right time to bring up her dream but when she turned back to Mama Lacey it was like she had never stirred at all, let alone spoke.

The rest of the morning for Terry was a windstorm of questions scattering around in her head as she followed her normal routine. She swept the floor with added energy to make the broom swish across the floor with almost a hiss. She pulled the chairs away from the table rather than lifting them to make a scraping sound. These were noises she had avoided thinking it would disturb Mama Lacey. Now she knew better. In the bustle of 'adding some life to this house', Terry had put the dream aside. Drawing the water for the

morning wash, she reached for the paring knife used for potatoes. It needed a rinsing before it was put to work. Her wet grip slipped on the bone handle and the knife dropped into the wash pan.

In her attempt to gather up the knife Terry found the blade first and it sliced into her finger. The blood welled in the bottom of the pan as Terry froze in shock. She lifted her hand out, trailing the red stream through the water. She brought her finger to her lips in hope of stopping the flow. The picture burst from the water like a gust of wind that blows open a sash. There was the sheriff hustling down the walk towards the jail, then Terry could see inside as young Mista Powers took at the bars to Junior's cell. She leaned forward for a closer look and the forgotten wound dripped into the pan. The swirls caused by the droplets were only in the background of the picture. A flush and then a chill ran over Terry as she kept screaming "NO!, NO!..."

The water in the pan was now almost total red and the scene started to fade along with Terry's consciousness.

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Bell was going about tidying up the study as if things were normal. He arranged all the papers that kept coming as if there was someone to respond to them. In the week and a half that Mista Powers has been down the stack of letters was turning into a small mountain. The messenger boy no longer asked if there was anything to take back after Bell almost bit his head off when he snapped; "when you see me with something in my hands you'll know if there's something going out!". It wasn't his nature to be mean to any

folks that's just doin' their job, but this change was just about more than he can handle. What with keepin' the house running, and all the while steerin' clear of young Mista and his ragin' ways, it was like having too many snakes out of the bag at once.

With Mista Powers all laid up, things went a whole lot different. Matty had been spending a lot more time out of the kitchen and it was just as likely for Bell to see her sitting alongside Mista Powers and playing her eyes over him like she was reading from a map. All Bell could think lately was that this was going to be the end for all of them. Those men are going to come back til they get some answers or they'll do things their way without Mista Powers' control and next thing you know they be walkin' around in here like they own the place. Them men just like Mista Powers, they only know how to take, and they'll turn on one of their own just like the jackals in the woods.

The shuffle of slippers signaled Matty's approach. All the smells of the kitchen wafted in behind her as she made her way past Bell towards Mista Powers. Her wide face with its full dark features was set into a half frown, like she may be on to something. Matty gathered up the small stool nearby and sat very close to Mista Powers. She started talking, but it was more for her own benefit. "It there for sure, layin' on him like a sack." Matty almost whispered the words. Bell thought for sure she had more to say, but she just went quiet and started back into watching for something. Matty and her people was ones that believed in a lot of things most folks took as crazy and Bell figured hisself like most folks. Bad as it is around here now, ain't no

sense in startin' to talk about mojo and the like. Best Bell knew about all of that mess was that it only worked on people who believe, and that for sure counted out Justin Powers.

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Sheriff Colter replayed what just happened for the fifth time in his head and it still didn't work out. There was something, but that something has no sensible explanation. It brought young Powers up short like a bolt of lightning. But it was as cool as a morning draft. Colter had seen some dumbfounded people in his life, and he reckoned the expression on young Powers' face was the hands down winner. Drunk or sober, that young man won't forget that. No such luck that it might have jolted some sense into him. He's headed to ruin on a runaway train. This whole town'll be damn lucky if that boy don't manage to inherit his father's holdings.

Junior made a rustling noise that broke the sheriff's concentration on the matters of Justin Powers, he was normally quiet as a mouse and the sound roused the sheriff from his chair. As he came into the cell room, Junior was seated like he was waiting for the sheriff to make his entrance. "Is there something I can get for you?" The sheriff asked, as much in an attempt at small talk as posing a question. Junior raised himself from the cot and walked to the bars, never breaking eye contact. Colter wanted to avert his gaze but couldn't, almost afraid to look away for fear of what he might see when he looked back.

Junior spoke flatly and evenly after what seemed like forever. “I just want to know how long you gonna keep me in here?” Same question with the same delivery that sheriff Colter had no answer for. He made an attempt at sounding official with his evasive reply. “That matter’s not up to me. It’s for the judge to decide.” Junior’s eyes narrowed slightly as he continued to size the sheriff up. “Water, I could do with some fresh water.” Junior said as he turned away from the sheriff and went back to his cot position. He produced the small pouch as he sat back down and turned his back to the sheriff.

It was a relief to Colter as he busied himself with fetching the water. There were moments when he wasn’t so sure who was in charge, him or his prisoner. Seems to be the judge is just going to let this lame horse continue to run. In this day and time, Junior does have a right to answer, but the way it works here the law gets a little bent. Colter could tell by the hard edge to Junior’s stare that he knew the same thing. Put plainly, you could say that the sheriff and the man in the cell were both captives.

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Terry felt the pain first as something not quite real, a distant message that you can hear but not figure out. She awoke with a start as the reality of her wound brought her out of the healing slumber. The throbbing came from beneath a towel wrapped and tied tightly around her hand. Mama Lacey was

at the table with a bowl before her. She sat so still Terry had to look harder to make sure it wasn't just her clouded head playing tricks. "You took a good spill, that hand'll be alright you just keep it dry for a few days." Mama Lacey said without turning her head. Terry swung her legs off the cot and made to stand when the room took to swaying and the lights danced before her eyes. "Best you take yo' time moving for the rest of the morning till' you feel right." Mama Lacey offered. She finally looked around in Terry's direction and even in her groggy state it was for sure that Mama Lacey was barely getting along. Her eyes had a milkyness to them, and they strained to take in Terry from the short distance between them.

Mama Lacey turned away again as she continued to talk. "This all gonna make more sense as days go by. With time comes learnin' and the pieces of the quilt fall where they need to fill in. It's more feelings than words that will give you the answers. You know well as me I ain't gonna be here much longer. Come a time for everybody to take the next step. Won't be time for you to waste wonderin' how far I made it from here." Mama Lacey reached out to the bowl and scooped with her fingers, bringing them back to her mouth. She more rolled her jaw than chewed whatever it was.

Terry felt steady enough finally to move from the cot to the table. Up close, Mama Lacey was nothing like the powerful little woman Terry had known all her life. She looked like if a good wind whipped up in the room it would sweep her out the window along with the stray feathers from the duster.

Terry leaned in and spoke softly, she did her best to make contact with Mama Lacey's wandering eyes. "I won't be able to not miss you." Tears

welled in her eyes as she tried to get all the things out of her mind in a few words. “Me and Junior, we always gonna be less without you here. We’ll pick up and carry on but you will never be really gone.” Terry reached across the table and laid her hand on the small one resting beside the bowl. It was alive but cool, warm like the embers of a fire that has long passed its blazing stage. The contact pulled Mama Lacey back from her wandering and she managed a smile that made the water flow down Terry’s cheeks with joy for the moment that may never come again. As their gazes locked Terry managed to choke out the words. “You have been everything to us.”

Mama Lacey closed her eyes and Terry felt a wave of words crash inside her head. At first it was like too many people talking at once to make any sense and like cream rising to the top of a churn the words fell into step. Terry worked hard to listen and remember the string of words that almost repeated themselves but not quite. Then there was a voice she knew all too well, it was the clear strong voice of the Mama Lacey from days gone by. “You got all you need in you child. They aint nobody can outdo you but you. Do right by what you got and this will be a better world.” The ring of the voice took Terry back to times when she could only look up and wonder at the now so frail woman that was once a giant in her eyes.

Mama Lacey pulled her hand away from the contact and just as suddenly the words shut off. Terry made to speak again but the frail voice cut her off. “No more talk, I’m much too tired. You get me to my chair and that’ll be enough.” Terry all but lifted the small body from the kitchen chair and ushered Mama Lacey back into the parlor. There was so much more Terry

wanted to say to the tiny figure but even though the voice was weak, it was firm when she said no more talk. Terry settled for curling up on the floor at Mama Lacey's feet. She hadn't recovered as well as she would have hoped. The planking of the floor was still cool from the morning and it was there Terry went back to sleep.

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The judge welcomed the two men into his office after stalling long enough to clear away the signs of his latest binge. He hustled the empty bottles and the ever-present glass into a lower drawer in his desk. He attempted to organize the mess of papers scattered about so as to appear like he'd been working. He knew the men only as associates of Justin Powers. The judge tried desperately to recall their names. The shorter of the two men cancelled his attempt by starting in with an introduction even before his bottom settled into the chair. His face was round and almost childlike except for the eyes that swept the judge and his office like a prairie falcon looking for his next meal. "As you know, I am Miles Wilkes and this is my partner, Jameson Burkes." The man spoke more at the judge than to him. "Our business plan has been derailed by the sudden onset of illness with Mister Powers. The reason why we're here is to find out the disposition in the matter of Powers versus Lacey. It's our understanding that it's just a matter of formality to bring charges against this Junior, and settle the matter with the forfeiture of real estate." This Wilkes person said his piece so easily that it almost had the

judge reaching for a pen.

The judge shuffled the stack of papers before him to buy some time as he weighed the man's summation. There was the matter of no formal signed complaint that the law states must be in place. Justin Powers was in no position to do so and that left young Powers to be the signee, and that boy was not an easy one to deal with. If for some reason this matter ever went before a higher court, that hellion could make looking respectable a hard row to hoe. Wilkes stared the judge down as if his inaction was more than a little irritating. His silent partner watched almost disinterestedly.

"My actions in this matter are restrained by time gentlemen. Justin Powers' will and testament clearly states a set period of time for him to be incapacitated before any heir or powers of attorney take effect. I am not at liberty to divulge that time frame, but I can tell you it is a substantial period. Mister Powers instated the clause some years ago during the malaria outbreak. Folks were delirious and on the edge of death for what seemed like forever and given up as lost, only to snap back and be right as rain once again." The judge figured these gentlemen knew the local history, but it helped ease his nervousness due to the constant stare of the man before him.

The three men sat in stilted silence until Wilkes broke his glare and snapped the brim of his hat as he rose from the chair. "I trust we will be hearing from you once this clause is no longer an issue." The man almost spat out the words. His partner had risen in unison and was almost to the door when

Wilkes spun on his heels, and the two of them cleared the judge's office without another word. The judge reached down in his desk drawer and produced only the bottle of whisky, he wouldn't be needing a glass.

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Sheriff Colter returned with the water for Junior and expected the same cold reception he'd gotten all along. Instead, Junior was standing at the bars expectantly. Colter made an attempt to ignore the new posture but the change was so totally unexpected that he just froze in his tracks. Junior started talking like he had been having conversations all along. "You know he will be back, he ain't gonna be denied. It ain't ever been any other way. He think he own the world. Long as he get away with everything he ain't ever gon' learn a lesson. Next time he come back you let him in here and lock them others out and I'll fix it." Junior's words had the total ring of truth. The sheriff would normally entertain the offer put before him but there wee forces at work much bigger than the both of them. You just don't buck the system that controls every thing and every body in this town. Even with the fact that Mister Powers may never be himself again.

Junior studied the sheriff with his piercing eyes as he shuffled from foot to foot with the bucket of water still in hand. "I know you ain't got no more choice in all this than I do but I do know you see what I'm saying." Junior continued. "We Ain't nothin' more than leaves getting' blown down the road by a big wind. Always been that way and it look like it ever gon' be. They

mean to take away from us what they give us long ago fore' they knew what was there. Figured it was OK to give the colored folks swamp land cause it wasn't gon' amount to nothing. We been there longer than most folks can remember, mindin' our own business and toeing the line. They all forget though just how much Mama Lacey did for everybody when the sickness visited. She took care of her own and most of the white folks when they was falling like flies in the early winter. Didn't seem like it was ever gon' end when one after another of your people and mine went the way of the dead. Mama Lacey kept this town from fallin' apart even as her own children, my Momma and Daddy, was called home. They don't think nothin' about that while they worm they way into what they want. You know it's so cause you just like the rest of them that had nowhere to turn." Junior's words were sharp and pointed with the plain truth as their handle. Colter sat the water bucket down and rubbed his chin as he fought for words to explain his situation. Junior took his pause as the opening for his closing words. "They just don't know that they's things much more powerful than money and fancy words." Junior turned away at that and went back to his cot. Colter sheepishly opened the cell and set the water bucket inside. There was nothing for him to say.

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At first it seemed like it was going to be another day as usual at the Powers house for Bell. He had given up on hoping for some kind of miracle to

release his boss from the prison holding him fast to the couch where he's been for the last three weeks. It wasn't much, but Bell could swear that he felt Mista Powers move as he straightened his covers. He was trying hard to see if there was more when Matty came into the room. "He been doin' that all mornin', like it lettin' up on him." Matty's words startled Bell. The room had been so silent that her statement was like a bell clapper going off. Bell did his best to ignore the cook woman's prognosis. No sense in playing to her way-out ideas of what was happening. It would only encourage her to start some kind of foolish chatter about spirits and all.

Matty moved closer as she carried on. "It gon' be a struggle for him to come back. That kind of control most often drains the fightin' spirit from a body. Dries 'em like a grape turnin' to a raisin." Matty reached around Bell and laid her hand on Mista Powers' chest. "It still mighty strong." Her fingers spread out and the veins in her strong hands pulsed mightily. She looked to Bell with her round face squinting up. "You best prepare for the worst. I 'spect he ain't ever gon' be the same. Bell was pondering Matty's words when they both were shaken from the core by the scream that rang out. "You git away from him, both of you right now." they spun in unison to see young Mista leaning against the door sill. His face was almost glowing red as he continued with his tirade. "It's probably something you black devils are doing anyway. Can't trust a damn one of you. I should pitch you all out into the street. Git back to the kitchen where you belong. And you find something else to do besides hover over him like a mother hen. Everyone of you is

worthless. Don't know why he couldn't see that 'fore now." Young Mista staggered across the room and shoved Matty toward the door and tuned on Bell as he raised his fist. "You touch him again and I'll bash your face in." Young Mista almost spat out the words. Bell took a half step back and assessed the railing figure. It was plain he was drunk as usual and in no shape to bash anybody. All the same, young Mista drew back and made the attempt. Bell caught his roundhouse swing and twisted the young man's arm behind his back. As the two men fought for control of the moment they were interrupted by a groan from the figure on the couch. They froze in unison and astonishment at the sound. Bell loosened his grip and young Mista took the opportunity to wrench free and once again renew his assault. Bell was in such amazement at the sound that he dropped his guard and the young man managed to connect with a glancing blow that caught Bell on the shoulder. With that, all restraint and respect for his position was forgotten as he returned the punch and sent the young man sprawling on the library floor. Young Powers looked up at Bell with disbelief and rage as he scooted away. He managed to get to his feet and as he continued his retreat he screamed at the top of his voice. "I'll get you for that you black bastard, you know better than raise yo' hand to me. I'm gonna make you and all the rest of them pay for this." It almost seemed impossible but the young man's face turned two shades redder. "When we're done you all will be sorry that you was ever born." Young Powers shrieked as he backed out the door. Bell worked at settling himself down after the run-in and went back to the couch where Mista Powers lay as still as ever. He leaned in close and looked

deeply for any further signs of recovery. All he found was the same non-response that said nothing had changed. Maybe Matty was right, this could be the end for life at the Powers house. Without Justin Powers to run things hope didn't seem much use. Once it was declared that the man on the couch was never coming back the last bit of normalcy would vanish like the morning dew. Bell almost choked out his plea as he fought back tears of anger and sadness. "That boy of yours is gonna tear this place apart at the seams, we need you back to make things right."

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It was dusk-dark when Terry awoke. She had curled into a ball at Mama Lacey's feet and it took her a long minute to make sense of her position. The closing darkness shaded Mama Lacey in her rocker and Terry squinted hard to see signs of life in the small figure above her. As if on cue, Mama Lacey rocked her chair ever so slightly. Terry stood and stretched full length to work out the kinks from sleeping on the wooden floor. In the half light, Mama Lacey gave off what might be considered a glow, or maybe it was just Terry's eyes adjusting. So much was so strange these days it was hard to know either way. A sudden pang of hunger sent Terry toward the kitchen. The bowl from which Mama Lacey had been eating when Terry first awoke was still on the table. The remaining portion of what looked like mashed potatoes, but had a totally different taste, was just the right amount to take the grumble off Terry's stomach.

Terry walked out onto the back stoop after finishing the bowl and the fading light made the shadows in the trees beyond the house stretch long and grey into the blackness beyond. There was something out there that everybody seemed set upon, it made no sense what people would want with some mushy old ground. Mama Lacey always told the little ones not to stray too far back from the house lest they git ate up by the ground. Terry to this day took that warning to heart and has never been half as far back as the land stretches. Even in her most adventurous times, the feeling of the ground giving way under her feet conjured up pictures of horrible things reaching up through the black earth and snatching her down into a world where all bad things live.

Junior was always back there. Seems like he knows just where to walk and in every instance when Terry wouldn't take no for an answer and followed Junior defiantly, her nerve would give out, the demons would start to play in her mind and her legs would freeze as Junior's large figure would fade away into the distance. It would be a pretty prize to see him come into shape out of the darkness beyond and stomp across the yard. It wasn't like he would come up and sit down beside her and tell Terry everything was gonna be alright. Junior never treated her more than a nuisance but any treatment would be better than flat nothing. Seems like forever ago when things was normal around here.

Terry stood and stretched, her reach got longer every day and she could almost reach the overhang above the stoop. Wasn't that long ago it looked as

far away as the clouds in the sky. As she brought her gaze down from the planks overhead the movement caught her eye. Terry concentrated to better tell what was moving. There was enough animals in these parts that it could be more than a couple of things. There was talk of bears that fooled the eye by walkin' on two like people. It wasn't long before the sound of distant voices put her questions to rest. Terry wished even harder now that Junior was here, he'd make whoever that was out there git on down the road. The further off sound of dogs told Terry that the people out there was movin' toward the Taylor place. Them old dogs start up once anybody get in nose range. That must be how they got back there cause she'd have known if they come through the front. Put Terry in the mind of weasels sneakin' around out there lookin' for somethin' to take.

The dogs settled down and the feeling of someone out there faded as Terry maintained her concentration. It was getting on in the morning and there was chores to be done. Even with Mama Lacey mostly not here, Terry knew full well what was to be done to keep things in order. She was sure there'd soon come a day when life would be like it was.

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The judge was taking his afternoon nap when the two men burst into his office. His inability to conceal his surprise didn't go unnoticed by the hawk-eyed shorter man. The two settled into chairs as the judge shook off the cobwebs. The judge had the presence of mind to pull forward a paper on his desk that he had been scribbling on with the men's names jotted down, one

over the other, to identify them. He figured it might give him a little edge back if he started out this conversation looking like he knew what was going on. "Mr. Wilkes, Mr. Burkes." The judge nodded in each man's direction as he spoke their names. Neither man returned his greeting verbally, only nodding in response. Wilkes drew forth a paper from his inside pocket and rose from his seat just enough to place it directly in front of the judge.

Wilkes spoke to the judge in a manner that said his position was not open to discussion. "The letter before you effectively dissolves our relationship with Justin Powers given his condition. It also announces our intentions to further our business dealings with Collin Powers, sole heir of the party of the first part. Lastly, it requires you as presiding judge to act on the matter of the competency of Justin Powers, given that the law states that after a period of 90 days an individual can be judged medically incapacitated."

The judge took his time to look over the paper and let the man's words settle in. He was speaking about Justin Powers like he was already out to pasture. And the thought of them dealing with that maniac of a son was something too terrible to ponder. Justin Powers did well to make much for himself, and that young'un could throw it all up in the wind should he take the reins. All the while he scanned the paper, the judge could feel the knife edge glare from Wilkes. The paper was in order and signed by the superior judge of the county, all neat and tidy, but not worth a hill of beans for the next month and a half. Mr. Wilkes and his smug partner will have to cool their heels on whatever deal they had cooking. It would be almost like right if Justin Powers snapped back and found them out for what they really are and sent

them packing. The judge looked to the men over the top of the paper and did his best to shield his dislike for the pair as he spoke. "It would seem we all have some waiting to do pertaining to these matters. I will assume this is my copy of your declaration and file it accordingly." The judge folded the sheet of paper in half and placed it aside. "In the meantime if there are other matters that need to be addressed I will gladly entertain them."

Wilkes made an effort to speak and his silent partner cleared his throat in a kind of secret communication that halted the short man's words. Wilkes looked at the folded paper and back to his partner and the two of them rose from their chairs and made their way out of the office without further talk. Once they were gone, the judge took the sheet and read it again just to make this all seem real. There was no way this was supposed to work out like this. The most powerful man in these parts brought down to a body on a couch, soon to be written off like a bad debt.

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Sheriff Colter spent the better part of the day avoiding going back into the cell area. Junior's words still rang in his ears, which was no surprise seeing how the plain truth carries on. Everyone around here remembers how one person got sick and in no time it seemed everybody had come down with the sweats and fevers that was burning them up like small trees in a forest fire. His most vivid memory of the time was when he asked Mama Lacey why she had that small black rag pinned to her bosom as she leaned over his own mother who was delirious and thrashing around as the sickness worked her

over. Mama Lacey looked into his small face with her all-seeing eyes and told him, “that there is for those that gone ahead of me, folks I love dearly.” It was like it was that day again in his mind as Mama Lacey laid the words on him, all the while laying soothing hands on his mother that seemed to draw the fire from her body and settle her down.

Folks around here never paid Mama Lacey with anything more than a high level of respect, but with this dustup over Junior, you’d think she hadn’t done anything. It aint much of a stretch to see that it had to be like all the other times that young Powers and his bunch was, ‘just out havin’ a little fun’, as they put it. Colter knew full well that the truth isn’t what wins out around here. It was his appointed duty to uphold the law as written. Not do what was right.

The afternoon had faded into the later part of the day and as the shadows started to give way to the dark, Colter fell into a fitful sleep at his desk. The racket in the beginning played out as a part of the fractured dreams Colter was having. The distinct smell of fuel oil and smoke jolted Colter awake. The sound of frantic activity from the cell area spurred the sheriff to action as he shook off the cobwebs of sleep. Junior was doing his best to beat out the flames dancing around in the area of the window to his cell. The tell-tale smear down the wall made sense of what was going on.

The voices filtering into the window over the sounds of the blanket flapping required no identifying. Colter gathered up a second blanket and opened Junior’s cell to join in the effort to put out the fire. “git him out here ‘fore I burn down the whole damn jail.” The demand from young Powers made it

plain he was hopped up on drink and in one of his frenzies. As Colter worked the flames alongside Junior he proclaimed aloud. "I'm gonna put this fire out and make the whole bunch sleep it off in here." The second can of flaming oil made a direct hit on the bars and sprayed the area where the sheriff was working with liquid fire. The mixture caught the leg of his pants afire and in his haste to extinguish himself, Colter got wrapped up in the blanket and fell to the floor, hitting his head on the bars in the process. The railing bunch outside continued their taunts as Junior drug the unconscious sheriff from the cell and toward the back door.

Without their efforts to put it out the fire had it's way with the jail house. As the pair cleared the back door, Junior could hear the blaze start to roar as it found more and more to feed on. Junior hefted the sheriff up into a semi-walking position and stumbled him away from the jailhouse to a small patch of bushes in alleyway. He made a makeshift pillow out of the blanket he had drug along as well. The sheriff still showed no sign of stirring as junior laid him down. Junior could hear the clanging bell of the fire brigade over the top of the jail house that was now belching smoke from every hole. Junior took leave of the area through the shadows.

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Bell fought back the tears that seemed to come at will lately, things in the Powers household have never been this bad. Those two men keep hovering around the house like vultures waiting for the body to get still so they can

feed. They been coming in and out like they own the place. Called themselves making it legal by strutting up with the sheriff and wavin' a bunch of papers nobody around here can read. Young Mista seem to be in cahoots with them, seein' as how he run everybody else out the house with his foul mouth blazin'. Wasn't for the fact that he can't boil water, let alone fix a meal, all the kitchen help would have been long gone.

Just the other day he threw a fit cause his eggs wasn't right, threatened everybody in the kitchen with a big butcher knife, damn boy done gone mad if you ask me. The only thing to do is stay clear of him when he flares up. Young Mista got the whole house staff ready to jump out of their skins, they so nervous 'bout what he might do next. Bell was doing his best every day to keep everybody that works here from stealing off into the night and leaving this house bare.

Justin Powers has never been an easy man to please, and is quick with his tongue, but there was never the hatefulness that just drips off the walls of this house. With nobody to keep him in check, that boy is headed down a dark path. Bell busied himself cleaning and rearranging the desk that hadn't been used seems like for as long as Bell could remember, the chair gave a slight groan as Bell dropped down wearily to sit and dare to hope. The papers had stopped coming a little while ago, so the stack that grew to a good size hill in the center of the dark wood top remained as frozen as the figure lying across the room on the oversized couch. The last piece on the stack was those papers them men waved like a flag of victory. That's exactly where the black cat landed for only long enough to get a footing and pushed

off in a flash of fur. Bell sat dumbfounded long enough for about half the pile to flow from the desk into his lap. The cat made another hop and ended up on the arm of the couch. The animal eyed the progress of the dwindling pile like it had planned it just that way. Bell fought back the initial urge to chunk the first god sized object he could get his hands on at the defiant cat since Mista Powers was somewhat in the line of fire.

Instead, Bell yelled at the top of his voice for Matty from the kitchen. "It's that Damn cat again. Git in here Now!" Bell's was about to repeat his call when Matty appeared in the doorway. Her normally wide eyes narrowed as she looked from Bell to the cat sitting on the arm of the couch like he owned the place. "once and for all Matty, you git that damn devil creature out of this house if you have to drop it down the well." Bell's words were meant to be an order, but they came out more like a plea. Matty stood her ground in the doorway, and spoke more to the cat than to Bell. "This ain't none of my business, I got no control here." Her voice was low but strong. The cat followed the interplay with a slow scan of his deep green eyes back and forth between Matty and Bell.

Bell gathered himself together and lowered his voice as he spoke again. "I need you to be with me on this, you know well as me none of us got any control here. We just do what we can to get thru this." Matty's gaze came around to Bell as he attempted to make his case, there was a set to her jaw that was visible despite her full round cheeks. Bell filled the heavy silence with the shuffle of gathering the papers from his lap. Matty took a half step into the room and leveled her gaze back on the cat. She mumbled something

that Bell couldn't make out as she shuffled across the room. The cat rose from its sitting position as Matty closed in, but never made any moves like it was going to spring away to nowhere. Matty wiped her hands on her apron right before she reached out, lifted the cat by its scruff and gathered it into her full bosom.

Bell watched Matty's broad figure move down the hall as the cat stared around her shoulder defiantly. He could only hope that she took his words seriously and that was the last he would see of that black devil, there was just no way of knowing, since Matty was full in step with all that talk about folks being able to control others with some such kind of powers. It was more than Bell could handle trying to sort out what's next, with everything hanging on whether or not Mista Powers ever comes back.

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Terry was well into her chores when she heard Mama Lacey call. It was at first like the times she thought it was coming from out of the air, but then it came again, like it hadn't in a long time, it was a strong full voice. "This old woman is 'sho 'nuff hungry. I don't know I remember the last time I had some bacon and biscuit wit' a lil' molasses standin' near." The menu request was like a spring bird's song to Terry's ears.

The fire in the stove had been banked back for so long since there hadn't been much life around the house that Terry had to work to bring it back to a roar that would get the pans hot and ready. She was sawing on the bacon

slab when she heard the rustling from the other room. Feels like it could have been a life ago since she heard Mama Lacey moving about. Terry held the blade still as she listened to the soft shuffle and the thunk of the stick on the wooden floor. The reassuring sound made Terry smile. She finished her cutting and went to work on the biscuit flour. The water was slow to come through as Terry stroked the pump handle. It finally came through with a cough and a spit and Terry gathered up enough to wet the mixture in the bowl. As she kneaded the flour into the right tightness, Mama Lacey came into the kitchen and settled into the chair at the table.

“I swear you must grow overnight like them punkins in the patch.” Mama Lacey gave a soft giggle as she made the pronouncement. “I soon be half yo’ height way we goin’ in opposite directions.” The words stopped flowing to Terry’s ears but they never let up in her head. “ You gonna make a fine tall woman that someday will show folks things they never thought possible. All you see in every way will guide you there.” Terry didn’t know whether she was supposed to answer. What would she say? She listened without her ears for more but there was nothing.

It was still a great time to be fussin around in the kitchen with Mama Lacey sittin by. The skillet gave off its hot and ready smell and Terry put in the slices of bacon, they sizzled and popped in disagreement. The hand rolled biscuits went in below the fire and Terry almost felt like singing aloud. She just settled for the warmth of Mama Lacey’s eyes working over her as she finished up on the easiest chore she’s had in a long time.

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Junior had moved all thru the night to get in position behind the Taylor property and stay upwind of them dogs the next place over. Wasn't no doubt that there'd be lots of folks looking for him. The quieter he did this, the better. Black Gal always came out in the breaking morning light to greet the day. No matter how he tried some mornings to get her to stay nested in the crook of his arm and share her warmth, she would slide away and softly say, "Be right back, I gotta go say hello." It was like watching an angel float across the doorway as she would slowly stretch out her arms, like she was going to hug the whole world, raising the loose white nightgown away from the curves and swells of her body. That vision played out in his head many times while he sat in that cell waiting for somebody to do something, right or wrong.

Junior smiled to himself as Black Gal came into view. She moved into a shaft of morning light working its way thru the trees, the dark skin of her cheeks glistened as she gave her ritual glance towards the heavens. It was all he could do to keep from running headlong in her direction and scoop her up and hold her, like she was going to vanish, just like smoke up the chimney. Best she don't know any more about him bein' loose than what the grapevine bring her way. Sheriff, once he get himself together, sure to come askin' Black Gal questions. Junior filled his eyes with the sight he expected to one day be the first thing he sees for the rest of his born days.

Black Gal stopped once and looked in his direction, like she could hear his mind working, but she soon turned back and looked toward the cabin where a voice must have called out. All too quick she was gone back inside, leaving Junior to his thoughts of what to do next. Mama Lacey gave him direct word to come home only when he hear her say so. Wasn't any place else for him to go but to the wet woods. There was a place that he could be sure nobody was goin' to walk up on him. Most everybody else call it a swamp, but Junior knew better, and was good and happy most everybody thought it wise to stay clear. It was mostly a matter of havin' a feel for where the ground will let you pass instead of trying to swallow you whole. Walk the tree line and there always gonna' be some footing. Clear in towards the center of the grove there's places where you might forget for a minute that everything below the grass is good and juicy.

All this has to come to a head in one fashion or another. Life can't go on this way. Mama Lacey always say that when good goes out, it clears the way for good to come back. Nowadays it looks like doing right by other folks only brings sufferin' to good people. Junior picked his way far enough into the woods that the outside world disappeared, and he settled in to get some needed rest after a night of fits and starts.

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For Terry, the rest of the day was taken up with tidying about. Mama Lacey

had eaten more food than Terry could ever have imagined. It was better than a present for her birthday to have Mama Lacey up and around. Now if only Junior was to walk thru that back door. It seemed that all the world was looking brighter with every pass of the broom across the wooden planks of the kitchen floor. The small pieces of dust floating in the streaming sunlight danced around the room as if there was a party happening. Terry went to the back door to shake out her dust rag, and that is when she felt it.

The sensation welled in her chest and made her pull in a full breath. Whatever it was came to Terry on the soft breeze that wafted past her into the house. She stood stark-still to make an effort at sorting this out. Mama Lacey said many times that there was much she would see and feel, but still it came as an unwanted visitor. This was the day that all would turn back towards good, Terry mused as she shifted from one heel to the other trying to shake off the slight chill that came with whatever it was that held her in its grip in the open doorway. With a firm set to her young jaw, Terry jerked herself free from the strange pull and tried to turn her back on it like that would make it go away.

Try as she may, the sensation was like a slight pull at the hem of her dress, like the short briar thorns in the fields out back. She hummed a simple tune as she finished clearing the morning dishes from the drying rack, the music took the edge off her nerves. She discovered one dish that had missed a full cleaning, and set it back into the sink and stroked the handle of the pump to bring up water. The water landed into the dish and almost instantly made an

image as clear as throwing back the curtains at a window. At first, it made no sense because there was nothing to see but darkness. The small specks of light came clearer and clearer and revealed an arm holding a fire stick.

Terry fell forward onto her elbows to get a better look at the apparition when the face thrust forward into the fire light, causing her to jerk back and almost fall over the chair behind her. When she regained her composure and looked back tentatively for more understanding of what she was watching, the only thing she discovered was her own wide brown eyes. She tried every method she could to bring back the picture so she could make sense of it, but there was now only the water lolling back and forth in the dish.

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Sheriff Colter opened his eyes to a scene that made no sense. He knew the woman leaning over him as Matty, from Mista Powers' house, but what was she doing here? As he tried to rise and speak, the searing pain made him tense stiff as a board to weather the storm of agony. Matty placed her hand on his chest and the weight and warmth of touch somehow made the pain step to the back of his consciousness. It was still there, but without the raw edge, when she lifted her hand. Matty's large brown features made her smallish eyes seem out of place. They looked almost too far set back, like something was drawing them back into her head. They darted from one side of his face to the other, like she was taking measurements.

"I'm here cause you took a terrible fall and caught the back of yo' head on the cell bars..." Matty stated. "Look mostly like you gon' be OK, but it gon' take a while." Her words only registered to his far ear, making her sound far

away. Colter tried to get more understanding of what and how, but the attempt at speaking brought the pain back home again. “Seems the swellin’ on the backside comes into yo’ jaw and make it smart like that.” Matty assessed. “You just need to lay quietly and let time bring about a change.” Colter saw Matty’s eyes soften as she made her proclamation.

Just as Colter was coming to terms with not knowing enough for now, the face of the judge floated in above him, it only made this puzzle stranger. Colter could only muster up a look of surprise. Any other movement of his head threatened to dash him back against the rocks of pain. The judge gave Colter the same cursory measuring glance that Matty used before he spoke. “Yesterday there was a fire in the jail. The fire brigade found you out back, but not hide nor hair of Junior. Hope is that soon as you get better we can figure out the chain of events surrounding all this. In the mean time, I got every able body in the county out looking for your lost prisoner. He’s sure to know what transpired, whether he’ll tell the truth or not.” It was the same as listening to Matty, the judge’s voice only falling on his far ear. The judge pulled back, but not out of Colter’s field of vision. Colter could only hear the words the judge spoke in Matty’s direction as a murmur. She moved in at the exchange of words and the pair of faces spent a long second eyeing him over and both images pulled away in unison.

The judge’s words jogged Colter’s clouded memory, and he was once again fighting the fire and then there was the fresh flames and then nothing. So it now made some kind of twisted sense to him, they think Junior must have somehow been in on this. Colter made the discovery that he could bring his

arms into play if he did it slowly. The waving of his hand was another matter. Colter winced with each wave of stinging pain as he gestured. The judge was the first to come back into view. Colter witnessed whatever was going on through the judge's shifting expression, until his vision was, just like that, blocked by a cloth that settled softly onto his face. The vapors coming from the cloth sent a small tingle down his frame as Colter could swear that someone had snatched the bed from under him, and he was falling slowly into nowhere.

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Justin Powers was still drunk. It made his words of rage drag and scrape from his mouth as he railed. His cohorts were the same kind of sloppy drunk as they piped up in agreement. "This shit gonna end here and now. We gonna wipe them off the face of the earth. First the old witch-woman and then the rest of that sorry nigger tribe." The cabin they were using as an impromptu headquarters was the same one in which Justin played as a young man. It had become his refuge these days from the horrible sight of his father stretched out like a rag doll. The rest of them from up at the house knew damn well better than to come down there. It was the only spot where Justin Powers Jr. ruled, and his word was the law. He could raise all the hell he wanted on this patch of ground and not have to take in those looks from that snooty nigger Bell, that thinks he knows everything.

Justin Powers made up his mind then and there that Bell had some

medicine coming too. It was his fault for lettin' that conjure-woman, Matty lay hands on his father. "We got Junior last night, and come good and dark we ride again." Justin Powers fueled his rage with more whiskey as he laid out the plan. "We gonna have to lure that little she-witch away from the house and get them separated. Nothing like a little fire on the front and back end of the house at the same time to get that done." Young Justin Powers felt in full control as the glazed eyes of his two cohorts him paid him the proper respect.

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Sleep came easily for Terry. Mama Lacey coming around made for a day like none she could remember of late. It was so easy to move about and take care of all the things that keep the place going. For a long time they have just been chores necessary to complete and make the day pass. Wasn't much more to look forward to with all the dark clouds floatin' over their lives. Somehow, just the sound of the tap-tap of the stick on the floor brought about some new and fresh light. She had fallen onto her pallet, and was asleep as her head made contact with the pillow.

The world of plain sleep is a place where everything is slowed down a half step so you don't have to work too hard to keep up. Unlike the fitful sleep of bad dreams and visitations where the whole world is running behind you so close that if you stumbled while trying to keep ahead, it would roll you flat and leave you as nothing. Terry floated along on plain sleep clouds. Clouds that for all their comfort block out the view below, where things are taking

shape in a hateful form.

The heavy footsteps roused Terry from her ideal place, the thud of the steps on the porch came up through the floor past her pallet and shook Terry totally awake but bewildered. Even as she wondered who it could be, she already knew it could all be to no good. Terry lay still at full alert trying to get a plan working in her head. There was only the footsteps and no voices. At least two set of feet moving about. Terry turned her head in the direction of the room where Mama Lacee was and there was only silence. Mama Lacee was always alert like a fox but the sounds from outside caused no stir from her room.

Terry rolled across the floor and made it to the back door about the same time as the footsteps faded from the front and were now crunching their way towards the back. Now there was deep mumbling and the smell of fuel oil raced in under the door right at her face level. She recoiled away and shifted to a crouch position. The pail on the sink held the last of the water she had used to do her final cleaning to, but nowhere near enough to wash away anything like what she just got a nose full of.

The whoosh of air and the yellow flare came at the same time. Terry sprang up from her crouch pivoting from side to side as she weighed whether to attack the flames licking underneath the door, or see to Mama Lacee. The fire was more immediate, Terry made for the bucket and with all the force at her command she pitched the water into the gap at the bottom of the door. The push of the water shoved the flames back. The next sound rushing its way into Terry's senses was the scream from outside, then, there was the

frantic voice. “Put it out, put it out!” the voice repeated.

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Young Justin Powers just knew this was going to turn out right. How hard could it be for the two of them to go around back, douse the door, and count to ten before they light it off. It was such a simple plan, one that obviously was not coming together in the right way, given the screams coming from their direction. All pretense of stealth was gone as Young Powers raced toward the frantic pleas now getting farther and farther away from the back of the house. It didn't take much to pick out just where the sound was coming from. Just off the clearing out back Justin Powers could see the lingering flames dancing beside a good sized tree.

As he got close enough to make out which one of his helpers it was, the odor of burning flesh stood thick in the night air. There was no movement from the figure lying face down, but it became apparent who it was by the sheer size, Wilbur was half again bigger than Harold. Young Powers wheeled back to make sense of why Harold was nowhere to be found while his friend went up in smoke. The fire the two men had set at the back door was now only a small blanket of flames licking at the sparse grass. Still no Harold. Young Powers fought back the urge to scream for his lost cohort, this was all going to shit and it would only dig him in deeper if someone could claim to hear his voice at the scene.

Standing between the two fires without a back-up plan, Young Powers

weighed his few options. Somebody was sure to connect him with Wilbur and Harold, the three of them was almost always together. Young Powers choked back the smell and inched closer to Wilbur's burning corpse. He kicked at the dirt until it loosened and started to pile up on the body, snuffing out the flames. His anger welled up as he laid blame on everybody in this world that stood in his way. Tears caused as much by the rising smoke from below and his total frustration rolled down Young Powers' face.

"That should have been you." The voice came from directly behind Young Powers where before there had been no one. He went to spin in the direction of the words and was thwarted by an arm that locked around his neck. He found now that even if he wanted to call out, it was impossible. "Now it's just me and you" Young Powers had never heard Junior's voice so close up, and it took the second statement for him to know who his attacker was. He tried to call out and that only made the grip tighter. How could this be?, was the question rattling around in Young Powers' mind. I left him for dead in that damn jail. This cannot be happening, everything was going from sugar to shit.

Junior continued to speak. "I guess you wonderin' whereabouts that little weasel of a helper you brung with you. He back over there, face down where I left him. He might come around if I let you loose enough to holler for help. You think he come runnin' to yo' aid, or take off like a scared rabbit?" Even if he had wanted to, Young Powers only had enough air coming in to stay conscious, so answering the question was not an issue. His only hope was how to figure a way out of this gorilla grip and hopefully get away from this

place. Junior was giving him no room to wiggle and his hold only seemed to get stronger with time.

Taking stock of his situation, Young Powers figured his only hope was to try some kind of move that might catch his captor off guard. He raised his leg and made to slam his heel down on Junior's foot, but only succeeded in stamping the earth and invoking a new level of wrath. Junior swung him about with a force he could only before have imagined. All the while, Junior hissed into his ear. "I should just separate yo' head from the rest of you like a Sunday chicken." It seemed that was going to be the case when Young Powers found himself flung down to the ground, and what felt like the weight of ten people was centered between his shoulder blades. The damp grass pressed into his face like many tiny spikes.

Junior was continuing to speak but the words were far away and muffled, it was like he was speaking to someone else. Young Powers tried to tune his hearing to tell if there was someone else speaking, but the biggest sound for him was the pounding of his heart. The weight on his back eased ever so slightly, and Young Powers took the opportunity to take in a few full breaths in an attempt to clear his head. He lay still and figured it was all the best for his well being to not put up any further struggle. Then the crushing weight was back, it threatened to drive him beneath the ground's surface.

From his ground level vantage point, Young Powers could see the body laying in the short distance. With the wisps of smoke rising, it looked like a mountain scape, with the piles of dirt around the feet adding to the effect. Young Powers found himself in a place he couldn't have conjured up in his

worst nightmare. Junior was now down at his level and once again speaking directly into Young Powers' ear. "I see you lookin', guess you want to know how big boy come to be what's left over there now. Well, he tore away once his breeches took to light and found a low hangin' branch on his way to some water. He made a snap and a pop fo' he went down real quiet. Sounded from his voice he was good and scared of fire. Guess he shouldn't have been playin' with it."

Junior grabbed a full handful of hair at the back of Young Powers' head as he spoke the last few words, making sure that Young Powers made no attempt to turn away. Junior continued to fill him in on the details. "That little weasel wasn't no trouble at all to take out. Most kind like you only take one good lick. He probably come to if you yelp for him. Let's see if he help you any more than he helped yall's friend over there." The tears of frustration that were there before welled again in Young Powers' eyes. He attempted to be strong enough to hold them back, but they fell the short distance to the earth in an almost constant flow.

Just as suddenly as he had set upon him and thrashed him to the ground, Junior rose up and away, removing the oppressive weight. Young Powers didn't know what to make of the turn of events, but he was still sufficiently shocked to remain dead still. Junior took a couple of steps away and held his position. "It'd be too easy to put you out of yo' misery. Best you left to live with what you done." As he finished his statement, Junior turned and walked away. Young Powers waited for what he felt was the right amount of time before he gathered himself up and moved away as quickly as he dared.

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Terry had waited for something else to happen after the voice calling for help faded away and stopped all of a sudden. There was no more fire to be seen, only the leftover smell of the fuel oil. The heavy footsteps that went from front to back traced off and left nothing but quiet outside. Now was the time to check on Mama Lacey, Terry took the few steps lightly since the commotion outside hadn't generated the slightest sound. Any other time, even if she wasn't up to see for herself, Mama Lacey always demanded to know what any fuss was about. The room was black as pitch when Terry first poked her head in. A little time for adjustment of her eyes brought out the parts of the room, and the small figure in the chair close to the window. Mama Lacey stirred ever so slightly, making the chair give a soft groan. The comforter formed around her waist and legs made her look to the eye as a much bigger figure. Terry resisted the urge to get closer. It seemed just as well to let her keep on with her rest.

Terry tightened her jaw and turned back towards the door. She knew she was going to have to open it at one time or another. It was now so quiet out there, save for the dogs barking in the distance, that were it not for the smell this could all be some kind of a dream. As she pushed the door open, the smell rushed in anew. There was a place scorched around the stoop that stood out in the moonlight. Out towards where the trees start to pick up from the grass, Terry could make out a figure that was much too big to be one

person. Without her even trying, the image started to clear for Terry. Like the moon was giving her the extra light she needed to see. Junior had that Mista Powers boy all wrapped up in a headlock.

Junior whirled his capture around, at one point sending the Powers' boy feet flying out with the force. He tossed the Powers boy a couple of more times like a rag doll, and pitched him to the ground. He boy went down face first and Junior came down on him with his knee. They were concentrating on something just beyond where Terry could see. Junior leaned in close for a short and then reared back after grabbing a hank of the Powers boy's hair. He wrenched the boy's head back like he was going to try and turn it around on his neck.

Terry let out a cry without thinking about it. Her words didn't seem to be very loud when she spoke them but she could see that they had enough volume to fall on Junior's ears. He stopped in mid-pull and cocked his head in her direction. Terry didn't see Junior speak, but she clearly heard him say; "This ain't yo business." Terry had always took those words from Junior to mean stay in her place, but this time it was different. Terry spoke her reply aloud at the same level of her first words. "But you can't do it like this" Terry had no better way to offer, but it made her pull up inside to see anybody suffer. Junior got up and walked slowly out into the thickness of the trees. In what was left of her field of vision something stirred in the grass, it was too big to be anything else but a person but it was hard to make out any more. Terry made herself as still as possible while she observed. Junior was coming back, she knew it, all she had to do was wait.

The Powers boy got up shortly and skulked off and away, in the opposite direction Junior took. The rustling shook up the one in the grass and straightaway that body rose up and scampered away in the Powers boy's tracks. Terry settled down onto her haunches and tried with everything she had to sense Junior through the black curtain of trees. The night air soon became cooler than she could stand and Terry reluctantly went inside, giving up her vigil.

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Bell was standing at the window of the library. There was not much to see in the blackness off towards the stables. Mista Powers was always fond of looking to the horses in the near pasture, it was one of the few times the man had kind words to speak when he talked about how he liked to watch them gallop about. He could stand at this spot for what seemed like hours. There was no reason for Bell to hold back his tears as he looked back into the room at his silent companion. The dogs barking pulled Bell's attention back to the outside, as he looked harder he could make out movement, somebody coming over the near fence. Didn't take much more looking to know it was young Powers, his walk was a little more steady than usual but there was something else about him.

Bell wiped his face dry and made ready for whatever comes in the door, most usually young Powers would stumble on out back but he was on a path to be inside in not a lot of steps. Then the sound that made no sense earlier

became clear, it was young Powers wailing at the top of his voice. He had a kind of chant going, repeating again and again; “All wrong, All wrong...” Bell took his own steps to meet young Powers at the door. His face was white as morning snow, and his eyes were wide and red and streaming water. Before Bell could open his mouth to ask what’s wrong, young Powers reached out and wrapped him up in a hug. It was so unexpected all Bell could do was return the embrace.

The wailing stopped and was replaced by a low moan. Young Powers smelled of a strange combination of alcohol and fuel oil. His heart was pounding like a trip hammer. Bell pulled back to try and sort things out, but all he could get was jibberish. Young Powers stopped wailing, but there was still a tremor in his voice that made him almost impossible to understand. Best Bell could make out was, somebody was dead and it wasn’t who Young Powers planned it to be. Had to be somebody white for all the water flowing from the young man’s face. Couldn’t have been anybody important knowing the company he keeps. He finally said the one thing that shed a little light on the subject; “That old witch-woman, it’s all her doin’ “ Young Powers said mostly to himself. What was him and his bunch doing there? Bell pushed away from Young Powers and spit out his statement before he thought about his place. “ You had to know it wasn’t gonna be nothing but bad for you, you must be out yo’ mind to go back there!” Young Powers stiffened at Bell’s words, but he didn’t snap back in his usual fashion when anybody other than a white person said direct words to him, he just looked into the distance over Bell’s shoulder. Bell stood his ground and watched as

the tears slowed almost to a stop. Young Powers mouthed something but no sounds came forth and he brushed past Bell as if he weren't there and headed for the back of the house. Bell traced Young Powers' path by the sound of his receding footsteps until he heard the back door shut but not slam as it usually did.

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It didn't take long for Harold to make it back to town and head straight for the tavern. It would have been a lot quicker had the horse he left tied up been still there. All Harold could make of the further stroke of bad luck was that Powers had loosed the animal as he left. Harold ground his teeth as he waited for his whisky-no-water. He was gonna need more than a few to wash down the sight of Wilbur running away trailing fire. Powers said it was gonna be so easy to take on the old woman with just the girl watchin' over her. Right now, Harold couldn't see a way to look at this to make it any worse. He reflected on the recent past; watching Junior descend on Powers and take him to the ground like a calf at a roping, then proceed to give his catch a good thrashing, Harold held his secret position in the hedge row. It was over in what seemed like a minute and forever at the same time.

The slight built man did his best to keep the shakes from taking over and rattling his head off his shoulders. There was one instance during the scuffle that Junior turned and looked in his direction. Wilbur was a lump of a figure in the background. When junior turned his gaze away Harold dared to breath again. He left his hedge row sanctuary only after Junior let up on Powers and

rose and walked away, followed in short fashion by Powers pulling himself up and limping away in the opposite direction. As Harold got closer to the laid out figure of his friend, the smell of burnt flesh was full and strong.

That smell was still hanging in his nose as he inhaled the whiskey in the glass set before him. The aroma dulled the memory smell only slightly. Just like the vision of his friend lying smoldering in the field that kept popping up over the pattern of the patrons in the bar going about their business.

Everybody seemed full of spirits in many ways given the volume of talk. All of them happy-go-lucky, while his life was going down the hole. Wasn't gonna be any simple way to explain how Wilbur came to be where he is.

They were gonna come looking for him once Wilbur was found. Powers was most likely gonna try to hide behind his daddy and not get any of this dirt on him. Harold made a deal with himself that there was not gonna be any way he takes all the fault, while Powers slides by.

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Sleep for Terry came, but only after many fits and starts. Throughout the entire ruckus tonight Mama Lacey had been still and quiet in her chair. Where normally the slightest disturbance would have her wantin' to know who and what, not even the smell of fire and the howlin' of voices stirred her. It seemed like forever that Terry lay on her cot with her ears tuned up to listen for any noises outside that said trouble had returned. In the between times of her outside vigil, Terry cocked her head in the direction of the darkened room where the only sign of another person was the occasional

soft creak from Mama Lacee's chair.

Terry's thoughts bounced around what she would do should those no-goods come back. Would Junior be there the same way? Had he always been out there watching? The questions kept coming until they backed up like grains of rice in the neck of a bottle. The dreams started when sleep took over. Terry found herself standing in the kitchen, but it was not quite like the kitchen she spends so much time in. The table didn't have the nick out of its corner where Junior was playing with the ax and it slipped out of his hand coming to rest in the table like it was the cutting stump out back. The curtains at the windows were not the ones she and Mama Lacee made only three months ago. Terry had been so proud of her first effort at sewing and was trying to piece together why they weren't there when the back door swung open and a strong young pair of hands lifted the little girl into the room. The bright-eyed child was wearing a long cotton bed dress. She made an attempt at walking, and settled for hands and knees to start across the kitchen floor. As he came into view Terry knew it was Junior, but this Junior was young. Still he had the same stern set to his face that Terry has always known. Junior hustled up behind the scurrying figure and scooped her up, which brought out a squeal of delight. The sound of pure joy brought a smile to the young Junior's face and he twirled her about.

The little girl was still making happy noises as Junior stopped their merry-go-round at the table. He sat the little girl down on the floor, and in one move gathered up the hem of her bed dress and lifted the corner of the table. His voice was full but not as deep as Terry knew it to be when he spoke to

the little girl whose hem was now held fast by the table leg. “That should keep you outta’ mischief till’ I fetch Mama Lacey.” The little girl’s eyes followed his movement away from her and out the door with the curiosity only a child can have. Just as Junior was much too young to be the person that Terry knows today, the sight of Mama Lacey moving into the room without the help of her cane made this all someplace else.

Junior was carrying a bushel basket of potatoes when he reappeared. Mama Lacey spoke to him and her voice had everything but the scratch in it. “Set them over by the sink and make sho’ to give one to my helper.” Mama Lacey tilted her head in the little girl’s direction. Junior sat the basket down and rooted around till’ he came out with a small potato that was almost round as a ball. He drooped to his knees and lined up the distance between him and the little one. The little girl studied Junior with equal intent and when he rolled the spud in her direction she was in position to gather it up. Junior rose and left the house. Mama Lacey busied herself at the sink while the little girl went about making sure that the potato toy didn’t roll too far in any one direction. The game stayed in the little girl’s favor until one push was just a little too hard and the potato rolled one extra turn that took it out of reach. The little girl made every effort to reach out only to be held back by the hem of her bed dress held fast under the table leg.

Her plaintive cry for help only caused Mama Lacey to look over her shoulder. Mama Lacey sized up the little one’s predicament and smiled. When she spoke to the little girl, her voice was warm. “Reach out for it in every way you can. Make it come to you. You can do it. You just don’t know

that you can.” At that statement Mama Lacee turned back to the sink. The little girl had appeared to not be paying any attention at all to Mama Lacee’s words. She pulled at the gown from her all fours position with the determination of a plow mule. “I know you heard me. You just got to try it yo’ way first. You’ll see.” Mama Lacee said more to the sink than to the little girl.

Before not long the little girl moved back just enough to take up a sitting position. She raised her small arms and stretched them out in the direction of the distant spud. The potato made a lazy spin. Terry found herself wanting to speak out in surprise and at the same time finding that there was no way for her to make a sound, she could only watch with her jaw slack with wonder. The potato took another spin in the opposite direction, and rolled just far enough to be recaptured.

The little girl gathered the potato into the fold of her night dress and contented herself with a game of covering and uncovering it with the gauzy material. Mama Lacee gave a soft chuckle before she spoke again. “You gonna make the world spin like that one day. All things in their time. Can’t say that I’ll be there to see it, but I’ll be there nonetheless. All things in their time.” Mama Lacee broke off her words and started to hum a tune that Terry could somehow remember, but couldn’t say that she had heard it before. The pleasant ditty of a tune was interrupted by a sharp rapping at the kitchen door. Mama Lacee cocked her head in the door’s direction. “Come on in sheriff, don’t nobody knock like that but you.” She spoke more like she

knew it was the sheriff even before he knocked.

The sheriff had the same red face Terry always knew, but it wasn't as full and flush. He wasn't so round either. The sheriff stood and fidgeted for a long stop before he spoke. "Miss Lacey, I been sent here to let you know that Mista Powers is mighty grateful for you bringin' his boy thru the fever. Says to tell you that this here property is yours, free and clear. This here makes it legal." He laid a piece of paper on the table as he finished his statement. He fidgeted some more as he measured whether to say anything more and was about to cut and run when Mama Lacey spoke. "That there just a piece of paper. His word what count in this matter. Woe be unto all us if he break it." Her words made the sheriff halt his steps toward the door. He looked from the piece of paper on the table to Mama Lacey at the sink. She never turned in his direction. Finally the sheriff found the use of his legs and made the two steps towards the door almost as one. He half-turned back as he was clearing the doorway and said; "Yes maam", and was gone.

Mama Lacey picked back up her tune as she went back to work on the potatoes. Terry desperately wanted to say something to the Mama Lacey before her but all she could do was watch. The little girl stopped her game of hide and seek with the potato in her lap. She pivoted her small body around to face Mama Lacey at the sink. At first, the child's sounds were just small noises, until she did her little best to mimic the tune Mama Lacey was humming. The tune persisted in Terry's head as she drifted further down into a level of sleep where there are no dreams, only a velvety blackness.

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The judge was sitting in the back of the tavern when Harold came in with that ‘spooked pony’ look on his face. That little weasel most never traveled alone. It was usually him and the big one trailing behind young Powers. The judge could never remember the other one’s name. He would never have known Harold’s had it not been for him sentencing the man’s father to twenty years hard labor for crimes too numerous to mention. It seems Harold’s whole line was meant for nothing but trouble. Seems if there was something about that was unlawful, one of that bunch was involved somehow. The look on Harold’s face as he gulped down the whiskey said that something must have gone wrong somewhere. The sharp-featured little man held tight to the glass each time the bartender came across with a refill, as if afraid he wasn’t going to be able to get it to his mouth fast enough.

Any other time the judge would have set the sheriff to sniffing about, it’s usually not hard to ferret out the activity of those that are not all that bright. The sheriff was showing a lot of promise toward full recovery, but was still a bit shaky on his feet. The man the judge mustered up to fill in while the sheriff heals was not the type to ask the right questions without stirring up a hornet’s nest, he was just best left minding the jail. The judge flagged the bartender over to his table. “You got any idea what is eating your customer, he looks a lot like he’s got more than a bee in his bonnet.” The judge questioned the bartender. The bartender made a production out of wiping his hands on the tail of his apron before he replied. “Can’t rightly say that I

know anything more than he's intent on workin' his way to the bottom of that bottle." The man shrugged as he went on with his spiel. "The three of them were in here early on, with Powers lookin' like the cat that ate the canary. They looked to be gearin' up for something but that's all I can tell you. From the look on his face and the speed of his elbow, it seems that maybe the plan ran off the rails." The bartender gave the judge his summation and half-turned back toward the bar like he wanted the conversation to be over.

The judge took the opportunity of the moment to ask the bartender the name of the big one. "What do they call the big fella?" The judge attempted a casual tone when he posed the question. The bartender shrugged again. "Can't say as I remember. Let you know if it come to me." The bartender started moving as his words faded off. He was almost back to the bar when he wheeled around and quick-stepped back to the judge's table. "Name's Wilbur, can't tell you his last. Don't know that I ever heard it." The bartender flipped back and beat a hasty retreat to the bar.

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Bell had seen Mista Powers move this morning, he was sure of it. Or was it just his mind wanting it to be so? Matty was in from the kitchen earlier and she moved about Mista Powers like she was goin' around the sides of a box, her large frame seemed to float. She babbled on in her usual manner, but there was a set to her round face that made her normally wide eyes narrow to

almost slits. “Ain’t there like it was...” Matty would say, amidst the rest of the jibberish she was spouting. She stopped and started back around in the opposite direction. “Ain’t there like it was...” Matty repeated.

Once she seemed to convince herself of something or the other, Matty backed out of the room and gave a wave of her arm as she went down the hall toward the kitchen. Bell dismissed her actions right off, like he always did until Mista Powers took a full breath and pulled his shoulders up. It could have just as well been a twitch that the doctor says is nothing more than ‘memory movement’, the body just doing things cause it remembers from before. But it looked like he was trying to wiggle out of something. Bell did his best to make busy with sorting out all the mail that continued to pile up as it went unanswered. He made a special stack of all the letters with the name of that irascible little man that thinks way too much of himself. There wasn’t a lot Bell could read, but he knew that name when he saw it. The rest he put in order of dates.

It seemed best to Bell for him not to dwell on what might be. The mind can take you further afield than you need to be sometimes. If he started to pay attention to each and every little twitch, there’d be no time to keep this house in order. But, he found himself at every turn looking towards the figure on the couch for some kind of sign. Matty was back in the doorway before Bell heard her coming up the hall with her customary foot shuffling. The rasp and slap of her slippers was one of the few things around here that don’t change. Yet here she was, big as life, like somebody picked her up and set her in place.

Bell brushed off the thought of something outside of normal, and laid it away to his preoccupation with Mista Powers and his condition. Matty took a long time to just look into the room before she opened her mouth. She didn't speak right away, she started making sounds that were more grunts than anything else. Her round face twisted one way and then the other as the noises poured out. Bell was just about to put an end to her little show when Mista Powers gave out a long low groan. Bell flashed a look towards the couch and back at Matty to see if she was somehow behind this, and her eyes as large as dinner plates said she was surprised as anybody.

Matty shuffled across the room and stood directly over Mista Powers. She hadn't made anymore noises of her own since the sound from Mista Powers. Her large figure pretty much blocked Bell's view as she fished around in her apron. Whatever it was she was after played hide and seek down in the pouch. Both her arms were working full time when, in the next breath, she jumped almost clear of the floor. Her arms flew from the confines of the apron to steady herself. In the same movement she managed to wheel around and proclaim her findings. There was very little to see but the fields of white in her eyes. Her first sound was a big intake of air, then the words started streaming out. "Lawd, Lawd, Lawd, don't know when I ever seen anythin' like that. It just jumped out of Mista Powers. The force was way beyond anything I done seen..." Matty continued to say more but the words were coming out too fast to recognize.

Bell waved his arms in a big circle to gain Matty's attention. This was the last thing he needed today, her coming from the kitchen and playing doctor,

or witch-doctor, which was more like the talk coming from her mouth. Matty focused on Bell and slowed her words. Bell was raising his right arm to point Matty back in the direction she belonged when the next sound was a voice that had fallen silent some time ago. It wasn't the big booming voice that sometimes threatens to rattle the paint off the walls, but it was Mista Powers speaking. Matty moved to the side at the sound to reveal the figure on the couch reaching feebly out as it spoke. "Bell?..." For the first time in however long Mista Powers' eyes were searching out answers instead of gazing of into the distance. His voice had a big crack in it like a hinge left shut for a long time. "Bell, you need to get me up to speed." Mista Powers intoned. He seemed to completely ignore the large and looming presence of Matty before him.

Bell instinctively shooed Matty toward the kitchen as he made effort to see about Mista Powers. Mista Powers' eyes turned in the direction of the shuffling sound Matty made as she left but they never did really settle down. "Is that Matty, from the kitchen?" Mista Powers asked in a way that sounded like he already knew the answer. Bell held his answer as he put together what he was witnessing, when he did reply, the eyes flashed in his direction like a searchlight, washing back and forth. "Yes Mista Powers, that's Matty. She done gone about her business while I check on you." Bell said the last part a little louder and in the direction of the kitchen.

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Terry opened her eyes to the shaft of morning sunlight that cut its way between the curtains in the kitchen window. The warm stripe of light told her that she had slept much too long this morning. She pivoted her head around to listen for stirring in Mama Lacee's direction, the soft creak of the chair said she was still settled. Terry made as little rustling sound as she could rising for her start of the day. She went to the sink and gave the handle just enough stroke to bring up what it took to splash the night of dreams down into the pan. Terry intentionally avoided looking down into the pool of water after her rinse, and made for the back door with it at arms length.

She was just in the motion of pitching the water out into yard when the feeling took hold and her glimpse into the departing water showed Mama Lacee. There was too much stillness in the image that flashed by. The slash of water hit the ground and was taken up by the soft dirt. Terry looked back over her shoulder into the house, the quiet gave her a chill. The first thing she needed to do was make some noise, and she did that by rattling the pan back into the sink. She fussed her covers into a neat pile and went to the rest of her chores. Terry was rolling out some biscuits when the creak of the chair was loud enough to let her know Mama Lacee was stirring. Terry dusted off her hands and went into the adjoining room. Mama Lacee didn't open her eyes as she spoke when Terry came in. "You'll see much, much more. You'll see me long after. No need for you to worry 'bout when I move on. None of us have any say over that. You ready. Know it or not."

Terry took in the words and wanted to have her say but Mama Lacey went on. “There’s much about this world you yet to learn. Thing to do is listen real good and look real hard. Ain’t like it use to be for us, but it a far cry from right. Up to the ones like you and me to see that others stay to they word. Sometimes folks got to find out that the truth is a ugly beast. There’s many ways to get heard, and you’ll pick up on them as it goes on. Ain’t enough words to explain how it comes to us.” Terry made again to speak and Mama Lacey reached out and took her hand. The contact set off a tingle that spread throughout Terry’s body. Suddenly she was here and at the same time she was watching Junior grow up, while seeing the two beaming faces looking down on her and making baby noises. The sheriff was there too, wherever she was. Soon there were too many places at once to figure them all out and they started to layer over each other like covers building on a bed. Terry could still see parts of all the people and scenes in the pile peeking out from the edges. She tried desperately to fix on one and found that it made her dizzy enough to go to her knees and brace her free hand on the floor. The tingle faded and took the images with it. It was then that Terry realized how cold the hand she held onto was.

Mama Lacey was still breathing, but it was so shallow that Terry had to lean in very close to assure herself. Terry massaged the hand in an attempt to impart some warmth. Ever so slightly, Mama Lacey would give a grip in return to Terry’s efforts. Terry could hear Mama Lacey say she was ready, but she wasn’t so sure she could stand up to all this. It could be in the next minute that the shallow breathing could stop, and what was she to do then?

There was stuff she already knew, like where in the far field Mama Lacey told them she wants to rest. She had always kept house so that wouldn't be something she would have to learn. Terry could say to herself that there was much she knew about and how to do, but she has never done any of those things without Mama Lacey being there.

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The judge was not real happy about being out at what must be 7 am, headed across a field. He preferred his days to start a little later. The sheriff's deputy came banging at the door to the judge's room over the saloon it seems like hours ago yelling about a body behind Mama Lacey's house. Now, they were trekking towards the spot pointed out by someone that called himself chasing down a stray horse, only to be lead to a body. The figure sprawled out just beyond the tree line was the big one of the pair that shadowed young Powers, the one the bartender called Wilbur. He was only slightly burned, but very much dead by the odd crook of his neck.

The deputy took a position on the far side of the body and cleared his throat to speak. "Appears he come from that way, Mama Lacey's house there." He shyly raised a hand and pointed in the direction of the place that wasn't much bigger than most other shacks in these parts. "I did some looking around and seems like there was some kind of fire at the back. Grass all singed, and it smells of fuel oil. I didn't check inside but looks mostly like not much damage. Most folks around here steer clear of crossing paths with

Mama Lacey left it on her terms. I didn't see much reason to disturb anybody." The deputy said the last part with almost a sigh of relief. "I could make out enough of his tracks to see that he went straight from there to this low hanging branch. Something must have scared the bejesus out of him." The summation from the deputy covered everything but the reason for the fire in the first place. It had to be the three of them. Must have been out for what they consider a night of fun that didn't turn out anywhere near like they planned. Makes sense of the way the little guy acted at the bar last night. It was a good thing that sheriff Colter is well on the mend. The judge made a series of mental notes to go over with the sheriff soon as they talk. If it involved the Powers boy it was going to have to be handled a certain way. Colter had a knack for finding out answers without ruffling too many feathers. The less most folks know about this, the better.

The judge instructed the deputy to make damn sure the man that discovered the scene keeps this to himself. "You tell him that I said if I hear it from anyone else I'll be charging him with this crime." The deputy nodded his head vigorously in response to the judge's decree. The judge continued. "I expect that sheriff Colter will be fit enough in a couple of days to check at the house." His statement brought a look of relief to the deputy's face. "Get him bundled up in something, let Miles, the undertaker know that he needs to round this one up in quick fashion."

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Junior watched the judge and the deputy look over the man on the ground, from his vantage point in the scrub trees where he lay flat. He had gotten there just before light to stake out a spot to check on the house and find out who would come to find the one that met his end last night. Junior had half-expected one of the others to show up. It was the horse that brought someone to the scene first. Whoever the man was, he spooked like a jackrabbit when he saw the spreadeagle figure. Dashed away back into the woods in the opposite direction of Junior's spot, never to be seen again. Soon enough later the deputy showed up and he moved around the body like it was going to jump up and grab him by the seat of his pants.

They were gonna have to come up with some kind of full sized cock and bull story to make this one go away. The usual way of acting like nothing ever happened don't work so well when there's white folks laying dead. He wasn't much to start with, like a lot of them ones that think just cause you white make you somethin' special. The morning sun had walked its way from the edge of the clearing to the point where it was beaming full down on the spot where the men stood. The judge did a lot of motioning and pointing at the deputy whose head was going up and down like a runaway oil derrick. Rightly, he stalked off towards the road. The deputy stood fast for a short time and moved away in a quick step. No time to go to the house, cause they, or somebody like them, will soon be back.

Junior rolled onto his side and thought about the call he got last night. It wasn't like those many other times when Mama Lacey called to him. Always before it was strong and loud in his head, like someone is standing right next

to your ear talking. The stone in his pocket was still warm, but not with the heat it usually puts out. Junior knew it would come, he had heard somewhere that even the sun in the sky will one day burn out. Mama Lacey was never meant to be here forever, as much as he would like it to be. She has so much as said it herself a time or two. Still doesn't make it any easier to know she's leaving. It might be a little easier if the law wasn't so intent on passin' out its own kind of justice. Sheriff Colter knows full well that he was wronged from the beginning, Junior could see that in the man's eyes when they talked before all the foolishness started, but he was just as bad as them for doin' their bidding. Junior figured that there had to be some good in the sheriff somewhere else he'd have never dragged him out of the burning jail.

Junior looked to the house, his impulse to head in that direction was held up by the reemergence of the deputy from the far side of the clearing. The undertaker was the next person to appear and the two of them rolled the body up in a roll of burlap. They used the horse, that had just been standing patiently by in the background, to drag the package off through the trees.

This would be the best time to go to the house, since they got their plate full with the cleanup, but the memory of Terry telling him to not come home till Mama Lacey called, held him in place. Some kind of gut feeling had drawn him to the house last night, where he found the group of fools trying to burn the place down. Now he was stuck in the shadows waiting for who knows what.

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Bell tried to figure what was different about Mista Powers' voice. Outside of the fact that it was mostly rusty from not being used, there was something else. They spent the first half of the morning just catching up on what has transpired since he was indisposed. Mista Powers had no explanation that made sense to make heads or tails of what happened. All he could say was that he felt far away, and for the most part, he could hear everything going on around him. "It was all kind of muffled like someone had their fingers in my ears. I could make out who was talking but not much of what they were saying." Bell watched Mista Powers as he spoke. The usual edge to his eyes was not there. The scowl that usually made up his expression had a different look. As he continued to speak it also struck Bell odd that for the first time Mista Powers was looking him in the eyes as he spoke. "I know it wasn't a long time but each day felt like it was going to never end." Mista Powers lowered his eyes and fell silent.

The silence was about to take Bell's breath, so he spoke out. "Them men by here more than once makin' talk about doin' business without you..." Bell let the statement trail off to see if Mista Powers really had been listening all this while. He shook his head and his voice was a little tighter as he spoke. "I do believe Mr. Wilkes will consider my recovery a setback. I plan to get shed of him at my first opportunity. Never liked the man in the first place. Comes a time when there are some things just not worth the money." Mista Powers' voice still had the ragged sound that comes from a long time resting, but it certainly had its old ring of determination.

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Sheriff Colter paced the small room, for the last two days there's been nothing else for him to do. His dizziness was a thing of the past, much like the swelling in his jaw. In the days he couldn't stand for long without the world tilting to one side, Colter took the time to make himself a list of what he was going to do to make sense of all that's going on. First on the list was to find Junior and have some words with him. Seems they started a conversation a while back that needs finishing. Next up will be finding out what all the talk is about a fire at Mama Lacey's. It sounded like there wasn't much to it, but around here there's always a little more than you can see right off.

Matty from Mista Powers' house had all but said on her last visit that he was going to be OK. She just scooted in and gave him a quick once-over and left like there'd be no reason for her to come back. The judge was supposed to stop by later this day, and Colter planned to announce that he was once again ready for duty. It would be good to be back out and about. Sometimes a couple of days can seem like forever.

The steps coming down the short hall outside the door told the sheriff that his visit was going to be sooner than later. The Judge entered the room with his usual air and made for the chair like he was about to open court. Colter watched as he was sized up and obviously considered well. The Judge made an attempt at showing he cared by his first words. "It's good to see that

you're doing OK, I spoke with Matty and she says you should be just fine.” No sooner than he spoke the words he was back to business as usual. “There has been some things happening at the Lacey house. Seems there was a small fire at the back from the looks of it. Doesn't look like it did much more than smudge up the door. The real matter at hand is the body that turned up in the field close to the house. It's the big guy of the pair that skirts young Powers about town. I had him moved and put away until this can be sorted out. Nobody better at getting to the bottom of things than you sheriff.” The judge let his words hang in the air. Colter figured the judge was waiting for some sort of reply, but felt real easy about letting the silence carry. Be interesting to see just how far everybody was going to go to keep young Powers free of any mud.

After clearing his throat longer than necessary, the judge continued. “not real sure just how this Wilbur came to hit the tree that twisted his head way too far back. His pant legs were burned pretty good, so it seems he was maybe the one that lit the fire at the house. Somebody made an attempt at putting him out so it stands to reason there was at least one other person there. Still no sign at all of that Junior boy. Could be he was the one that run the man under the tree.” This time the judge used cleaning his glasses as an excuse for a pause, still fishing. Colter kept his tongue. It was just like the old days as the judge started barking out his words. “ It's your job as sheriff to bring this person in for some answers. This matter needs to be put to rest.” The judge was up from the chair at his last word and stomped from the room, slamming the door behind him.

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Terry wrestled with the thought that if she never left Mama Lacee's side there might be the chance that she could keep the dreams from coming true. But it wasn't a dream, she had seen it, clearly, in the morning light. Mama Lacee has said many times that there will be lots of things she will see and never be able to do anything about. Terry wished with all her might that this would not be one of those visions. There had to be a way to help. Terry also thought back on the talks about the powers within her that will 'come to her in time', as Mama Lacee put it. Where were those powers when she needed them here and now. All she could see as she closed her eyes and concentrated was this bright light. Terry stopped thinking about everything but the light, and it started to sort itself out into different shades of bright. There is no other shape in the world like the small figure of Mama Lacee, and she stood out clearly. Terry couldn't hear Mama Lacee in her mind like she has always done so this just didn't seem anywhere close to real. Mama Lacee was looking in her direction, but the brightness of the light over her shoulder made her no more than a definite shape. Terry started to take a step to close the space between them and the quick upswing of the arm that made the hand come up flat and face out, stopped Terry in her stride. Mama Lacee's voice was a whisper as soft as the wings of a butterfly as it brushes your cheek. "This is the point where I go on. Be true to what you know." The light took on a new level that made Terry turn away in retreat. When she

dared to look back again, Mama Lacey wasn't there. Just the whitest white there ever was.

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The Powers household was coming back to normal as Bell saw it. Mista Powers was almost back to full voice. It was now no problem to hear his call from the kitchen. Bell was giving Matty the dinner order when the almost shout rang out. "Bell, Bell, I need you here." Bell was into the parlor in quick fashion and he found the old Mista Powers standing full and tall. There was a smile on his face that lit it up like the glow of a roaring fire. His eyes were wide in wonder. He raised his arms and watched their upward progress with the gaze of a child. He held his arms almost above his head and tilted his head back to his raised hands. "I can't say what it was but I can say that I'm clear of it. Like a wet wool shawl being lifted from my shoulders is what it was like." Mista Powers worked his fingers much to his delight. He shot his eyes back down to Bell and the smile was still there. Bell found himself smiling back in reflex, unsure of what he was supposed to say in response.

The moment between Bell and Mista Powers was so consuming the both of hadn't heard young Powers approach, but they did hear his comment as he spat the words out. "It's a damn good thing you finally well. I thought he

was gonna try to put me out like he owned the place. Talkin' down to me like he got a right to. I truly hope you gonna be about puttin' him in his place. Be a fine day around here when things get back to normal." Young Powers circled Bell as he spoke. Mista Powers dropped his arms and packed away his smile.

Young Powers took a stance where he could take in the both of them and started to dart his head from one to the other as he continued. "Time the world knows that I will one day rule the roost around here." He glared in Mista Powers direction. "That day come and this place gets swept clean of a lot of things." His glare in Bell's direction was topped with an equal amount of pure hatred. "I'm damn well tired of folks thinking I don't deserve some respect..." Mista Powers raised one arm and leveled a finger in young Powers direction that cut him off. They went to war with looks at each other as Mista Powers announced. "That will be more than enough." Young Powers took a half step back. He made to speak again and Mista jabbed the finger in his direction. "I don't mean to say it again." Bell stepped back and turned to leave and it lit a flare under young Powers. His face reddened and he returned the pointed finger that made the two of them look like they were in a duel. "I will be heard by damnit, if not now, sooner than you might think." With his last word, young Powers raised his other hand and leveled a finger in Bell's direction. He backed out of the library, all the while maintaining his aim at the two men.

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Junior looked the clearing over real good for any sign of someone scoutin' for him. He knew he was going to the house one way or the other, he just wanted to be ready for whatever. There would be only one reason why the stone in his pocket no longer gave off any heat. He spent all last night trying to figure out how to follow Mama Lacey's last wishes as she told them; A short time to say few words, a few prayers and return her to the earth from whence she came. Must be the reason he never got the call he was expectin'.

It all sounded so nice and simple, till you figured in that the minute one of them lays eyes on Junior they'll be lookin' to carry out the joke round here they call justice. Junior could still see the hard set of the jaw of little Terry as she handed down Mama Lacey's words; 'She say don't you come till she call you'. Junior had never before went against Mama Lacey's word and even now, with the thought that she has passed on foremost in his mind, he could not bring himself to cross the clearing. Then, big as you please, Terry comes out on the back stoop and looks straight in his direction. Her appearance was all the assurance he needed and he slowly rose and started towards the house. Terry spied him when he rose to full height, and her eyes widened so that he could see it from the distance separating them. She never left the stoop as Junior approached but he could see her shifting from side to side, like she was trying to figure out which foot to start running on. As he neared, Junior could see the water welling in her eyes. His last few steps were one big stride as Terry launched herself from the stoop into his arms. He caught

her and returned her bear hug squeeze. She spoke into his shoulder amidst the tears. “she’s gone, what we gonna do? What we gonna do?” Junior didn’t have a short answer to her question, only held her tight. They were everything to each other now.

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Sheriff Colter watched Junior as he crossed the clearing to the house. He made the move like he was sure there was nobody watching him, tall and upright. The girl was standing on the porch, bobbing like a cork on a fishing line. When they got right up on each other they grabbed hold like one or the other was going to vanish in a puff of smoke. There was no sign of Mama Lacey that the sheriff could see, plus, the feeling wasn’t there. It was something he remembered feeling the first time ever coming here, like he was being watched over.

As sheriff Colter watched, the two spent a long minute hanging onto each other, then broke apart to say words that were just lip movements. Junior gestured back in the direction he came from, they nodded their heads as he spoke. Wasn’t much back out that way but bog land, just a shade drier than a swamp. As a kid, sheriff Colter played in the fields that bounced under their feet. It belonged to Mista Powers in those days, before he deeded it over to Mama Lacey and her people. Sheriff Colter recollected on the last time he was back there in those fields as a grown man, it was more like sinking in the earth with every step. It always felt like it was going to open up below

your feet and take you down in one big drink. Junior had just come into view from that direction like it was just another path. Big a fella as he is, you would think it almost impossible for that ground to carry his heft.

If he followed his orders to the letter, sheriff Colter would be planning on how to cut off Junior's escape route, there'd be no catching him should he make it back the way he came. It wouldn't take a lot to make it around the edge of the clearing to head Junior off, since he's totally involved with the conversation going on at length, instead, sheriff Colter held his place.

Presently, the two of them went into the back door, prime time to make a move. Colter was still in his spot when the girl pushed the door open, she stood to the side with her arms folded about herself, using the straight of her back to hold the door. Junior followed with a bundle cradled in his arms. He moved with short steps down off the stoop and across the clearing, and was almost to the tree line when the girl gave up her place at the door for a sprint in his direction. The large and small figures melted into the distance and were soon blotted out by the trees.

For reasons he couldn't explain, Colter did decide to move in short fashion, but not in the direction of Junior and the girl. The door to the house was still open. Colter haltingly reached out for the screen as if he were expecting to hear a voice from within telling him to go away. In the absence of sound the hinge of the screen door sounded as loud as a magpie's call. The kitchen was sparse but clean. The sheriff turned full circle to look around the room he hadn't seen since he was a small fevered child cradled in his father's arms. He was small enough then to be laid on the table before him while Mama

Lacee moved about him, washing him down with her look. Colter couldn't remember all the details but it still stood out foremost in his memory how he could feel her moving around him even with his eyes closed to make the pain of the fever tolerable. It was like somebody took a roaring campfire and somehow trailed it around the room. Her touch made the hurt back away, like she was telling it what to do. Her smile that night told the little boy that Colter was then everything was going to be alright. Colter made another full circle turn, seeking out that fire and warmth and came up empty. The reality that settled over sheriff Colter brought forth tears that he made no attempt to hold back.

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Terry followed Junior into the back fields close enough to make her way using the depressions in the ground made by his steps. He was walking in short steps, such that she could match him stride for stride. They soon made their way far past any point that Terry had ever ventured. The familiar view of the house and the clearing over her shoulder was gone. All the while they made their way, Junior never looked back to see if Terry was trailing him. He just continued to make his way over the ever more soggy ground that had taken to making a squishing noise with his every step. Junior's head hung low as they went forward. It made him look like somebody else to Terry, since she had never seen him do anything but stand tall and proud. She wanted to say something to push back the jitters that were racing up her legs

from the feeling that the ground was going to swallow her up in the next breath. Junior slowed a little more and finally looked back in her direction, his eyes swam in the pools of water that stood right at the edge. He gave her a nod that stopped her forward motion. His lips trembled before he spoke. “You hold on right there.” He said softly. “I know where to go from here. It won’t be out of your sight.” Junior blinked hard as he finished speaking and the single tear was a shining trail down his face. He turned away and started directly out into an area that was a lot more water than ground. Each step seemed to make him shorter and shorter until he was waist deep and the surrounding area rippled with his movement. Terry pulled in a big breath and held it as Junior stopped and held out the bundle that was Mama Lacey. It was that time you’re never ready for. The time when the water made contact with the white cloth and it slowly darkened. The ripples seemed to hold their sway as more and more of the bundle went down along with Junior’s arms. He was into a full crouch that made it look like the ground was going to swallow them both. Terry dared to release the breath she was holding when Junior pulled his arms back and the swaddled bundle hovered on the surface. Junior slowly rose and folded his wet arms tightly around himself. It didn’t sink either end first as Terry thought it would, instead, the bundle dropped below the surface like it was backing out of the room.

It was hard to know how long they stood their ground before Junior turned in her direction and waded forward. His eyes were almost closed as he came her way. He opened them full and looked at her like she had never seen him before. “Just us now.” Junior said warmly as he reached out his hand.

They were at the edge of the clearing when the feeling washed over Terry. She was walking alongside Junior, and somewhere else all at the same time, she was back at the house. The sheriff was sitting at the table with tears rolling down his face. The image was so full and clear that it slowed Terry's steps. Junior felt the pull of her hand in his and rather than towing her along like he usually did when she didn't keep up, he slowed too. The next action was easier than she could have ever imagined, Terry turned her gaze toward the back door and swung it open till it came solid against the wall, making enough noise to shake the sheriff from his bawling. The sheriff was on his feet and moving out of the house in one fell swoop. The image faded back into the path before her feet as the sheriff cleared the doorway. Junior looked back over his shoulder with question in his eyes when Terry stepped back up her pace, but he never said a word.

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Bell didn't quite know what to do with the new Mista Powers. It was a good feeling to know that whatever was holding sway had passed. All that not knowing what to do was getting to be way too much of a load to bear. And yet now that the man he used to know is up and about again, it's like it is him, but in the same blink of the eye he's somebody different. There was no way to know if the edge to his look would return and make all things the same as they was around here. Right now it was all Bell could do to keep from looking like he was worried about something. All the talk they had

exchanged since young Mista backed out of the room with his attitude was light and easy. It was never like Mista Powers to talk about things in general. He most often only spoke matter-of-fact.

The shuffle-swish of slippers on the floor announced that Mattie was making her way down the hall. She was not what Bell needed at the moment. Her with them big flashing eyes that want to take in everything. She's at least been good enough to hold her tongue since Mista Powers popped back. Don't know what all her talk about how much she senses things at work would generate. Only a short time ago, it would have been a hands-down bet that any of Mattie's talk about mojo and the like would have got her ordered back to the kitchen quick fast and in a hurry. Here and now there was no way to tell how Mista would take to her goin' on. Mattie started speaking before her full figure was in view. "I was just wonderin' if anybody had a taste for somethin' special to eat. That kitchen been cool and quiet for a while now." She filled more than half of the oversized entrance to the library with as much her bulk as those ever-watching eyes. "I could turn out some of anything in short fashion." She took a long full look at Mista Powers as he stood before the window watching the horses in the near pasture. Bell did his best to make eye contact with Mattie and send her on her way but she was having no part of it. She sidled on into the room and went across to stand close by Mista Powers and share in his view.

For a short, Mista Powers was so transfixed with looking out that he paid no mind to Mattie as she gave him the once-over up close. He only slightly turned his head to address Mattie. "Just whatever you throw together will be

fine. Once you see what you came for.” Mattie didn’t shirk away at his statement, but rather took it as an invitation. She stood her ground for a few extra heartbeats before she whirled around made good her exit, all the while making happy clucking noises like a mother hen about to feed her chicks. All sounds of Mattie faded at the end of the hall before Mista Powers turned away from the window. He had the look of a man that wasn’t sure how much he knew and had no idea why. “Maybe she has more answers than we think.” There was as much truth to Mista Powers’ statement as any other possibility but instead of nodding his head in agreement, Bell shrugged his shoulders in reply. Mista Powers did show enough of his old self to be assertive enough to prod Bell for better answer. “Come now.” He said sternly but not sharply. “I told you I’ve been hearing all this time, and that goes for those visits from the kitchen.” Bell figured since he was backed against the wall he best speak his peace. “That Mattie she goes on all the time about ‘special sight’ and such. For me it may as well be the crowin’ of the rooster first thing in the morning. Making noise just cause he can. It ain’t never been no more than a bunch of words.” Bell found himself surprised with how strongly he spoke to the man that not so long ago would not have tolerated such forwardness. True to his new form, Mista Powers appeared in thought for a minute and then he looked directly at Bell and smiled before he spoke. “You work real hard at making that sound convincing.”

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The judge was just about to have his late afternoon nip when the sheriff found him at his usual table in the saloon. He held off from hoisting his glass until the sheriff sat down. The empty glass made a hollow rap on the table as he set it down firmly. "I expect you have things to say that I want to hear. This business needs to get sorted out and soon. Can't leave the man out of the ground forever." The judge glared in the sheriff's direction as he spoke. Fighting back his first instinct to get up and walk out, the sheriff shook his head before he answered. "No sign of Junior anywhere. I went back as far into the swamp as I dared and there wasn't even the first track." The sheriff watched the judge's fingers tighten around the glass. "can't rightly say one way or the other where he might be." The sheriff's continuing confirmation of no good news now had the judge pecking at the table with the glass. The judge used the rapping glass for emphasis on his words, "I don't have to ask if you looked for him in the house". The man was visibly reddening with his every word. The sheriff mustered up a sincere face and gave his report, "that girl called herself guarding the door, telling me that I might disturb Mama Lacey while she's sleeping, but I went on in anyway. Just the two of them in there. "

Now it was time for more whiskey. As fast as he drank the shot poured into the glass, he may as well have taken a pull straight from the bottle. The judge's face had the look of a man who has a bad taste in his mouth he just can't wash away. His eyes held closed for a long blink and danced about. He started talking before his eyes were fully open again. "You take those papers I drew up for you to serve over that horse issue and yopu go back and tell

whoever is in that house that it now is the sole property of Mr. Justin Powers from this moment on. That'll flush our boy out of the swamp. The thought of that old woman sitting on the side of the road cause she ain't got a roof over her head..." the judge smiled to himself after the delivery of his proclamation.

Sheriff Colter cleared his chair in a get-right-on-it fashion, if there was more the judge had to say, he would hear it sooner or later, but he'd had an earful for now. It would take the sheriff the better part of a day of sorting to find those papers. Seems nothing in the jail is where it was before the fire. He had made it always across the saloon and was almost clear of the door, when the judge's bellowing summoned him back. The sheriff retraced his steps but he didn't take his seat anew. The judge was filling his glass from the tail end of the bottle, so it took a bit before he caught on that the sheriff wasn't planning to stay long. He made no attempt to take the edge off his words as he spoke. "Since you seem to be in such a hurry, make sure you look in on that Harold character. See if you can't make some headway on getting the other end of this mess sorted out." The judge raised the momentarily full shot glass, gave it a short side to side shake before putting it away. "There's a lot at stake here, but you already know that." The sheriff gave the judge a small nod to acknowledge the statement. The judge waved the sheriff off without any further talk.

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Junior only came to the edge of the clearing after their walk back from putting Mama Lacey to rest, he reached both her hands in his and said he'd be watching out, and for her not to worry. She was left to make the rest of the distance back to the house alone, and now Terry stood full center in the empty kitchen. The late morning sunlight was slicing the room in half, what little dust there was, floated in place in the stream of light. Mama Lacey once told Terry that there was a message written on every one of the little bits. "you just got to sometimes take the effort to cipher out what they mean." Mama Lacey would say to her in a voice without moving her mouth. "we all leave them same bits of ourselves everywhere we go. Maybe sometimes for others to see and learn from. Other times for folks to know trouble when they see it." It now seemed to Terry that up until this day she could only remember the tiny flecks dancing about like they were playing their own little game of hide and seek, not frozen still before her eyes, like a painting.

Terry pulled in a deep breath and as she let it out the dust motes pulled back from her and moved aside for an object that wasn't there. In the clear spot left by the receding particles, Terry could make out a shape that was as familiar to her as the back of her hand. The sudden rush of words and images into her mind made Terry take a half-step back as they came by at blurring speed, it was all a stream of colors and noise. Somehow Mama Lacey's voice won out over the sound that was like a roaring river, "that just so you know that they aint no way to do with it all. You'll soon learn how to pick and choose. Much in this world for you to do. Them that's gone on have

never really left.” At Mama Lacey’s last word the sound and images dropped away, and the dust in the air took up its usual random dance.

A passing cloud drew down the light and the room took on a slight chill.

Terry took that as the motivation to work up a fire in the stove.

Her move to the door seemed to part the clouds, and the sun came back full force. Terry stepped onto the back stoop and just held there, the open sunlight warmed the fabric of her dress, whisking away the thought of gathering wood. She folded down onto the step and gathered her legs up in her arms. Terry looked towards the trees off into the short distance, there was nothing to watch for except the odd chance she might spy Junior, which wasn’t likely. Somehow, Terry knew she would know when Junior was near, just like she could tell when that sheriff was out prowling around. Right now, it was just her, and the empty house behind her.

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Young Powers was only part conscious, mostly because it made it much easier to tolerate the sour taste in his mouth, paired up with the dull thud in his head. Last night’s bottle was on the floor beside the cot where he lay in the sparse back room. The rapping on the window could have just as well been a small bird trying to make its way in for nesting. It finally became persistent enough to drag Young Powers into action. He forced his eyes open further and sought out the source of the tapping, only to see Harold’s eyes

peering through the glass, staring in like a lost puppy. He stopped his damn pecking when they made eye contact. Young Powers took his own good time rousting from the cot and making his way over to unlatch the door.

Harold's mouth started working before he could get fully inside, he bounced from one foot to the other as he worked on forming his words. "This is no good at all", he stared at the floor as he spoke, "the sheriff's been lookin' around after me." When Young Powers didn't reply, Harold repeated his opening statement a little louder, "This is no good at all." Young Powers turned away from the little man and reached over for the whiskey standing in wait. He brought it back around and waved it under Harold's downcast eyes, they locked onto the bottle and followed it like a cat watching a mouse that was going to soon be dinner. Harold reached out and Young Powers handed over the bottle. "Here," Young Powers stated while still hanging onto the bottle, "ain't nothin' a little whisky won't fix." He released his grip and the neck of the bottle went directly to Harold's lips.

Young Powers let Harold take two full pulls from the bottle before he spoke again, "We gonna fix some of this stuff that ain't right." Harold's eyes rose at the prospect of 'we', he always did need somebody to follow. "You and me gonna' one day run all this", Harold had himself another drink as he took in what Young Powers had to say, "then, we won't have to worry about the sheriff, or anyone else." Young Powers' proclamation seemed to make Harold forget his worries, he moved over to the stool beside the washstand and settled down with the bottle nestled between his knees. Young powers continued his presentation to the audience of one, "it's gonna take some

doin', but with your help, we're gonna soon be masters of this house."

Young Powers wrested the bottle from Harold, took a drink, and passed it back like they were in some kind of swearing-in ceremony. Harold quickly drank from the bottle in the same short fashion. Young Powers fixed Harold with a hard stare, and moved in close before he spoke. "Everything will work out fine, if you do what I say, when I say it." Harold was so caught up in the moment that he nodded in agreement to things he had no way of knowing about.

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Sheriff Colter was making his way to the Powers home, going through the list in his head of what he knew. It didn't take much questioning of that Harold character. The way his eyes danced around in his head looking for a way out at every question, said that he wasn't going to be very good at making his lies sound real, and that he was there the night Wilbur met his end outside Mama Lacey's place. That made it almost for sure that young Powers was also along for the show. Not much chance of the two of them being together without their puppet master along handling the strings. The judge had said he wanted this issue wrapped up, so maybe it'll be alright to drop in on young Powers without clearing it through channels, maybe get a chance to have a few words with him before he gets set up.

No doubt that after their little talk Harold made a beeline over to look for a skirt tail to crawl up under. Better he get there sooner than later, the sheriff

thought to himself, before they manage to come together with a story. Best part will be catching them together, and being able to sort out Harold's answers according to what young Powers has to offer up, with him standing by, most likely doing his usual squirming like a worm with a hook in its future.

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The dogs barking drew Bell over to the library window, Mista Powers had just settled in for a nap and the last thing he needed was a bunch of yipping noise. He caught sight of the sheriff moving along the far fence line towards the back of the house. Bell gave a good look at Mista Powers to make sure he was out, and moved back just far enough that he could keep an eye on the sheriff without the sheriff getting sight of him. It was pretty obvious from the sheriff's path that he was in the process of making a surprise visit, he skirted the far fence line, casually looking at the railing like he was checking it for repairs down the road.

It was going to be one of those screaming fits when the sheriff shows up back there unannounced. Young Powers don't take to people just showing up for whatever reason, one of the few ways he's just like his daddy. Bell figured on how to get to the back end of the house to catch the rest of the sheriff's plan. Matty would be sure to trail him, cause she can't stand to not know what's going on. Bell lightened his steps as he moved from the library into the hallway, he could hear Matty padding about and singing to herself in the kitchen. Inching closer, Bell measured the slap of her house shoes on the

floor until he could figure she was making her way to the pantry, which would turn her back to the door. As the slaps started to move away Bell took two large steps that cleared him past the kitchen door opening. Young Powers' voice got easier to understand as Bell closed the gap between him and the door. He was talking to that jumpy little man in a voice that almost sounded like he really cared, instead of spitting out the words like he usually does. Bell could make out something about a plan but that was as much as he got before the room went silent. Young powers next spoke in a low voice. "damn it all to hell. It's the sheriff, he must have trailed you here. What did you tell him? I told you to say we weren't there." The little man's voice sounded like he was going to let go of his water in his pants. "I did, I did, told him I was nowhere near Miss Lacey's place, I did, I did." Young Powers voice remained low but there was a sharp edge to his next words. "It don't seem much like you convinced him. He must want somethin' to be comin' round back." Bell moved a half step closer when the room fell silent. The creak of the door to the back yard was followed by Young Powers' voice, sounding far off. The best Bell could make out was that he was offering up a greeting to the sheriff. There were more words that trailed away from Bell's earshot. The door creaked once again and the room was quiet, way too quiet.

Bell stood for as long as he could taking in the dead silence, it had to be extra tough to pass the time for the one left behind in the room. It was OK for Bell to walk away, but the word must have been put to the little man to stay put, and lay low, like a baby bird being protected by its mother. Only

young Powers wasn't protecting one of his own, he was covering up his dirty tracks. There was only one thing to figure, and that was that young Powers and the silent little man on the other side of the door was there the night whatever happened that ended up with the big one dead, most likely the sheriff was here trying to get some answers.

Bell had no way of knowing how long Mattie had been standing at the kitchen door opening watching him. Her normally wide eyes narrowed as he came away from the door and started in her direction. When he got close enough that she could speak in a low voice she gave Bell her take on what was going on. "They up to something that ain't gon' be right for nobody." She ushered Bell into the kitchen, her mouth was moving, but no words were coming out, like she was turning over in her head what she wanted to say. She backed up to the sink and her eyes went back to full open, "he drunk up everything in the cabinet and now they drinkin' home brew. You know well as me when that boy get a snoot full things happen." She nodded her head up and down to make sure he knew what she was saying. "Ain't nothin' good gon' come from this..." Matty's words trailed off as the shouting came their way from the back room. It was easy to make out the words as young Powers gave his best effort at cursing the entire world. He railed at the target in the room with him about having to deal with the sheriff. Bell took in the words, all the while thinking that surely the sheriff was still somewhere close to earshot. Matty's eyes darted back and forth between Bell and the direction of the shouting. She came a step closer, and with a voice just barely loud enough to hear, Matty spoke words that were not her own. "I plan to get

rid of the whole damn bunch of them.” She narrowed her eyes before she finished, “the sooner the better.” Just as suddenly as she closed in on him, Matty stepped back away and put her hands over her ears and her eyes popped back open to the fullest. She dropped her hands and started wringing them together. Matty looked pleadingly at Bell before she spoke, “you got to do somethin’,” her voice was back to its normal tone.

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Terry had finally given up her spot on the back stoop, where she sat for the longest time trying to catch sight of Junior through the tree line. She knew it would probably be a while before he comes back, besides, here or not, Mama Lacey never did abide by her just sitting around when there are things to be done. She was reaching for the broom to do some sweeping when she looked at the garden for the first time in a long while. There were things that should be standing laying over in shame and the weeds were at their tallest and finest. Terry gathered up a basket and headed over to make the patch look like somebody cared about it. She settled into one of the rows and went at the weeds in a slow and easy way, like Mama Lacey first showed her. She would say as she worked her way along, “best take yo’ time child, cause you go too fast you might miss what you after.” Mama Lacey could coax a weed out of the earth till there wasn’t even a hair root left behind.

Terry was into her second row of weeding when she first heard it. It was like somebody calling to her just out of earshot. She did her best to ignore it and keep at her weeding, but it kept up. Terry swung herself around in the garden

row in what felt like the direction of the calling. She settled back on her haunches and closed her eyes. For a time there was nothing but the darkness provided by her eyelids, then the dark turned to gray and the outline of a place she had never seen before came into view. It was a big house with a big barn in the distance, there was nothing Terry recognized, until the outline of a figure moved down the fence line. In the few times she had seen him, Terry knew that there couldn't be anybody else that walked like the sheriff, he always moved along like there was plenty of time to get where he was going. The voice that she was hearing was stronger now, but she realized it wasn't calling to her, it was just very loud. The more she could make it out, the more it sounded like that man that reached after her basket on the street when she was going to visit Junior at the jail.

The shadow that was the sheriff kept up its slow stroll, like he was taking in what the loud voice was saying, it was almost nothing but a string of bad words. When the voice spoke the sheriff's name, the shadow figure stopped in its tracks. The voice said something about how he was going to take care of that meddling sheriff, and the rest of them. The screaming voice went on to say how they was protecting that witch woman and her tribe, which made no sense at all to Terry, since she knew good and well that the sheriff was sniffin' around here trying to get wind of Junior. The small pinprick of something biting her was enough to pop Terry's eyes open, canceling the vision. The adventurous little ant had made it all the way up her dress and down her sleeve, to where her lower arm was exposed. Terry studied the busy little speck that was now was content to make small circles, like it was

chasing its tail. Terry blew the ant off her arm, she once again tried to fix on what she was hearing before, but now, there was no hint of the voice.

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Sheriff Colter got the answer he was looking for, Young Powers wouldn't allow him in, no other explanation except that his little pet weasel was there. Top it off that the young man smelled like a still with the fire too hot, hard to believe that someone can smell that strong of alcohol and still be standing. He tried to sound in control as he stated his case, all the while weaving ever so slowly; "there ain't nothing written that says I have to let you in here without just cause", he made a grab for the railing to slow the wobble after his announcement. Colter stood his ground for a long minute, the young man was right, it would take a warrant for him to go looking around inside the house. Young Powers offered up his best glare during the short standoff, sheriff Colter let the moment pass by turning his back and walking away, it wasn't many steps before he heard the door slam as young Powers went back inside.

It was true that there wasn't much of a chance on this man's earth to get the judge to issue him papers to look around in the Powers house, a good dog don't bite the hand that feeds it. There was nothing to say the sheriff couldn't just hang around the area a bit, to see what he can hear. The shouting started almost like the slamming door was a starter pistol, Colter could hear plain as day as young Powers ran off a string of cuss words. There was a lot of talk

about everybody getting what's coming to them, how things were going to change once he was in charge. The raging voice rose and fell once the sheriff held his position, young Powers must have been holding court for his captive audience.

The subject of fire got the sheriff's full attention, some of the words sounded just like they did that night not so long ago, just before the jail erupted in flames. The way that he made no effort to tone down his voice as he spoke of, "torching everything and starting from scratch", left the sheriff to reason that young Powers meant to leave no one behind to tell the tale. The volume slowly dropped to a level where it was out of earshot. The sheriff's curiosity, and the need to shut down this runaway train drew him back closer to the house. He had been standing in the area long enough for the yard dog to give up his barking which allowed him to come alongside the back where there were no windows, and then work around to the wall just outside young Powers' position. Even as he listened, the sheriff kept telling himself that there was something unnatural about having that much hatred in your heart. "there ain't but the two of them in the house." Young Powers stated matter-of-factly. "we blow him and her away," with that pronouncement came the unmistakable sound of a shotgun being latched into action. "and then leave him with this, and put light to the place while the old man sleeps. Most anybody'll be able to tell is the poor boy just couldn't stand being black no more." For the first time, Colter heard a second voice coming from inside, it was more of a whimper, just loud enough to hear; " I don't know 'bout no killin..." , the little guy's voice stated the words that somehow were cut

short by some action Colter couldn't see. The snap in young Powers' voice called for blind loyalty, "You and me, we're in this together, you're in way too deep to go cold on me. Do as I say and we get this done."

The dogs starting to bark came out of nowhere. Colter twisted his head around looking for a source to excite the animals other than himself. The inside talk stopped, and all Colter could pick out was footfalls. The barking drew back to an occasional yip, the steps he was listening to trailed toward the back door as young Powers sounded like he was speaking over his shoulder. "It's got to be that damn sheriff, he been snoopin around here the whole damn time." Colter took in his options, and figured the surest approach was to come around the house and get in front of the situation, maybe enlist the little man inside to defuse this moment. The sheriff loosed the flap holding down his revolver as he made his move, the four steps to the door were made in double time. The back door flung open the instant the sheriff planted his feet, the look on young Powers' face was one of pure rage, he lifted the shotgun as he spoke. "This makes you the first one." The fire ball was a full heartbeat ahead of the giant fist that slammed into Colter, sending him reeling back into the yard like a discarded rag doll.

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Bell was standing at the window in the library, trying to work out in his head what he would do, should Mattie's prediction of things going from bad to worse come true. The booming report of the shotgun followed the

momentary

lull of the ravings coming from the back room. Bell looked to the figure on the couch and for just a moment, the old Justin Powers came back as he scowled and demanded to know, "what the hell is going on?". Mista Powers made an attempt to rise before Bell held his hands up and motioned for him to

stay put. "I'll see to whatever it is", Bell stated as he inched his way out of the library into the hallway. Mattie was at the door to the kitchen, she swung her gaze back in his direction and there was terror in her big wide eyes. Bell used the same method of motioning her away from the door and back into the

kitchen. He dashed the short distance down the hallway and pushed Mattie even further back away from the door. The high pitch of the voice of the little man was all Bell could hear. He was pleading with Young Powers to put

down the shotgun. Young Powers shut off the pleas with his declaration.

"This is the beginning of the end for a few others, and you'll be one of them if you don't stop sniveling." Bell scanned the kitchen, not sure what he was looking for. There was a pan of grease on the stove waiting on the chicken sitting in flour. Mattie started to speak, but Bell's sharp glance stifled her

words. He pointed to the far corner and Mattie followed his unspoken direction. Bell grabbed up the towel on the table and took the almost smoking pan, went to the edge of the door and coated the hallway floor with the contents. Almost on cue, there was shuffling and the little man was in motion from the back room as if shot from a cannon . The slick floor took his footing and he was on his back in an instant. He made frantic attempts to rise as the shouts rained on him from behind.

Young Powers stayed back far enough to be heard but not seen. His voice had a crazed edge. “That ain’t gonna save nobody” he shouted. The shotgun blast hit the far side of the doorway and made the little man curl into a ball. “I’m gonna make sure your black ass is next”, he snarled over the ratchet sound of the shotgun being reloaded. Before Bell could react, there was the figure of Mista Powers in the direct line of fire. He stood there as if his presence was enough to calm the situation unfolding. His words were an attempt to defuse the situation, “This has got to stop now.” Mista Powers took another step forward and Bell weighed the option of going out into the hallway, all the while the little man whimpered and tried to fold himself up even smaller. Young Powers screamed his reply to his father. “This is gonna

end when I say so, you are just like them.” In the next second Mista Powers was holding up both hands like a shield, his look one of disbelief.

Bell heard the shriek and the clatter of the gun to the floor. “Get it off me.”

Young Powers cried. The unmistakable sound of a cat’s hisses accompanied the struggle just out of Bell’s eyesight. Mista Powers stood his ground with a look that was now one of wonder. Young Powers came into view as a frantic combination of man and animal. The black cat was astride his head and working its claws into his face. He went down in the grease and the cat rode him to the floor, all the while attempting to separate his flesh from his skull.

Young Powers was so involved with saving his face that he made no attempt to break his fall. the thud of his head against the floor stopped his outcry.

The little man was now making efforts to distance himself from the melee just at his feet. In the effort he kicked out and the cat latched onto his leg and started tearing its way toward his face. The man reached out for the shotgun and had the barrel in his grasp when somehow the cat’s foot found the trigger, firing the weapon and making it pinwheel on the slippery surface.

The blast just missed the struggling form and tore a chunk out of the wall.

Almost like magic, the little man was on his feet and pedaling away toward

an escape route from the horrific scene. All the while the ferocious cat clung to his leg, all snarls and claws.

Mattie came forward to take in the scene, her eyes now narrowed and dark.

The little man somehow managed to get free of the cat and found enough footing to clear the hallway and head out towards the back door. The cat darted off in the opposite direction past the dumbfounded statue that was Mista Powers. Mattie took the initiative to move around Bell and slowly inch her way out of the kitchen. She kept her eyes on the splayed figure of Young Powers until she assured herself she was safe and picked up her pace and moved faster than Bell had ever seen towards the front of the house.

Bell moved slowly toward the splayed figure of Young Powers, his head was turned so that Bell could see his eyes, they were open but vacant. He was just about to reach down and Mista Powers' voice froze him in place with its strength and clarity. "leave him right there." Bell backed up a step and moved instead toward the shotgun at the end of the hall, stepping gingerly on the slick floor. As he made the last step toward the shotgun, Bell stole a glance out the back door, there was no sign of the little man. There was the sheriff ,flat of his back, his arms thrown to either side, with a god-awful red

patch in the front of his shirt.

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Junior was witness to the end of sheriff Colter, he stood off in the trees just far enough to not be seen. He had been backtracking the sheriff, looking to the man's movements for something he didn't quite know. The push that brought him here came as a whisper and got louder and louder until he came to this place where he now stood. It went silent as the sheriff finished his backward flight and splayed out like a busted sack of potatoes. Junior moved his position just enough to be directly in the path of the little man that was making out like a guinea hen flushed from its hiding place. Junior caught him by the scruff of his neck and swung him all the way around till he faced the direction he was doing his best to get away from. There was no resistance as Junior pinned him face down with a knee in his back, never giving him the chance to see his captor. The sensation came back. Junior picked it back up like the far-off smell of coming rain. It was slow and steady. His catch started to make a noise that was a cross between a cry and

a whimper. Junior shifted more of his weight onto the knee and the sound soon went away. There was something he was supposed to know, and the pitiful noise was not helping him sort things out. Mama Lacey once told him; “don’t just listen for me.”

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Bell stood in the library with the shotgun at his feet. He brought it and Mista Powers away from the unreal scene of the almost lifeless body. Mattie had stationed herself inside the doorway with her back firmly to the wall. Her eyes darted between Bell and Mista Powers seated on the couch, as if she wanted to be sure she didn’t miss anything. Mista Powers drew in a deep breath and spoke, “Such a mess...such an awful mess.” He rose from the couch and started toward the front door. As he started to open it Bell made eye contact with Mattie and signaled her to follow Mista Powers. He walked past the door and stood for a long moment before he picked up his pace and moved out of Bell’s view. Mattie trailed him without the usual slap of her

house shoes. Bell picked up the shotgun and was about to put it away when he heard the stirring from the hallway. He changed his grip on the shotgun as he listened more intently. Before his next thought, the cat stepped from behind the couch and moved low and slow out into the hallway. It went out to the center and sat staring back down the hall. Bell could put together the sound of Young Powers attempting to rise before he spoke. "You stay the hell away from me." There was a healthy dose of fear in his voice. The hiss the cat produced was like none Bell had ever heard before. It didn't narrow its eyes in the usual fashion, but stared openly and defiantly. The next sound Bell heard from the hallway was one of retreat. The cat popped to its feet at the sound of the footfalls on the back step. It made like it was going to give chase, and just as suddenly, turned and made for the front door. Bell kept the shotgun at the ready as he moved into the hallway. He kept full attention on his footing as he made it towards the back door. The sheriff was splayed out at the foot of the steps. The splotch on the front of his shirt was now almost black. Bell gave a cautionary look out before he advanced on the body. The shock and surprise of his last moment was still etched on the sheriff's face. Bell gently brought up the jaw to close the open mouth, and swept his hand

down over the lids to close the wide eyes.

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Terry wasn't sure how, but she could see the man standing over the sheriff. The vision came up like the little stars you see after you cough so hard you're sure you busted something. The man and the sheriff was all she could see, but Terry knew Junior was somewhere close. When the man reached down and ran his hand over the sheriff's face, the view stopped as quickly as a bursting bubble. She had no place to put what she just saw. Maychance Junior can sort it all out for her when she gets to talk with him. Try as she might, there was no bringing back the scene she just witnessed, so Terry did her best to make busy with the weeding of the garden she started what seems like forever ago.

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Junior waited from his vantage point until he was sure the houseman was back inside after tending to what was left of the sheriff. He reached for the

hank of rope he had tucked into his waistband, fashioned it into a slip knot, and slipped it over the head of the little man pinned under his knee. He leaned down further and advised; “I can make this as tight or as loose as I need.” The little man quickly shook his head in understanding as Junior drew the rope up tight. All the while he worked, Junior kept one eye on the fleeting shape of Young Powers. It didn’t take anything to get his catch to his feet and the little man did everything in his powers to keep the rope slack as he trailed Junior’s movements. They went off after Young Powers, keeping his shape the same distance away. There could be only one place he was headed given his direction.

Young Powers made his way on the hardened path most all folks take to get to places around here. The ground’s too soft for easy passage, is the way the locals describe anything off that beaten path. Not for Junior and his reluctant companion, they skirted Young Powers’ movement through what could best be described as marshland. At a spot where they held up their pace to lag Young Powers, Junior looked to the little man whose face was all-a-wonder as to where they stood. A man Junior’s size should be sunk to his knees in the soft undersurface. No mind to the little man that it happened long ago,

when he was just old enough to know what from why. Mama Lacey brought him out here, and they stood real close to this very spot when it happened, she got that look in her eyes like she was looking around the world and she reached out , and to this day Junior remembers the spark that jumped between them. Before he got the chance to ask, Mama Lacey told him; “long as you walk these grounds they will carry you like today”. When the two of them picked up their pace once again, the shape of Young Powers had moved from their right to left. The little man matched Junior step for step as they made their way, there was never an indication from the figure in the distance that they were on his trail.

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Terry didn't have time to take stock of the order she had restored to the neglected garden because the sound that was low and heavy took over. It rumbled around in her head until it made a picture of the man with hate in his eyes. Then there was Junior's voice. She could always hear him if he let her. Just like she could tell when he was close. He was beckoning her from

the backwoods. Terry instantly started to feel better as she made her way from the house and at the same time put distance between her and the low sound. She looked back to the house with the back door she was told to leave open just as the thicket started to block out her view.

Her mind replayed every step she took that day she followed Junior this way with the small white bundle. It wasn't long before Terry could see the signs of just how wet the land was. In the thinning light, the rays of sunshine bounced off the small pools of water dotting the ground cover. It was common knowledge around here that the dark hours brought up more and more of the pools till some areas are full under. All the while she could feel him coming, and the slam of the back door in the distance gave Terry a measure of his whereabouts. She stopped her movement to fix on her surroundings, Junior's nearness gave her some peace.

Terry held her ground and listened as eh tried to make his way into the thicket. The snapping of twigs gave way to the cracking of branches and then there was quiet. At this distance the sound tried to take over her hearing. Terry pulled in a full breath and did her best to make her words carry. It almost came out at the level of pure shouting, "What Do You

Want?”. There was a light easing up of the sound before the words came. “I just want to talk. Come on out here.” No sooner than the words fell off the sound picked back up. Terry took a set of long steps backward before she repeated herself, “What Do You Want?”. There was no easing up of the sound and the words boomed in unison. “I WANT YOU OUTTA THERE NOW!!!.

Terry continued her retreat and was so focused on the matter at hand that it was a total surprise when Junior placed his hand on her shoulder from behind. As Terry turned to take him in, the first thing she saw was the man with the rope around his neck. The man’s head was half bowed, and he kept his eyes cast down. Junior leaned in and his words helped settle Terry’s uneasiness, “You doin’ just fine.” at Junior’s urging the three of them moved back another group of steps and he looked to Terry and firmly shook his head. Terry took the cue, and this time her words were almost demanding, “What Do You Want?” this time there was almost no lag before the voice snapped back “I’m Not gonna tell you again, it won’t be pretty if I have to come in there and git you”. The rustling in the short distance sounded as urgent as the words. Terry watched as Junior changed his grip on the rope up

to where it was knotted around the man's neck, causing the man's head to jerk to attention. Junior stared the man down hard as he spoke. "You holler out and let him know you got her. Make him believe it so he come runnin' " the man quickly shook his head in agreement and Junior let up on his grip. The man tilted his head in the direction of the frantic rustling and called out. "Hey! It's me! I got her, come up from behind and got her." There was wonder in the voice that came back. "Harold, that you man?" the man on the rope spoke again quickly, "Yeah it's me. I can't hold her much longer, git out here."

The sound of progress took on more and more of the sound of splashing and flailing. At one point the voice called out more to itself than the man on the rope. "How'd you git out here?" The words were spaced out in long breaths. Junior gave a quick tug of the rope to insure the man's silence. The next words were only spoken out loud in desperation. "this ain't no good at all. I got nothing"" for what seemed like way too long there was nothing. When the voice came back there was no doubt about his predicament. "Harold, I need you bad, I got no way out, I'm stuck deep." The lack of a reply from the man on the rope generated a fury of thrashing sounds only to end with a

plea. "Harold...can you hear me man, I cant go nowhere." The man on the rope shifted his weight from one side to the other in a slow rhythm. Terry closed her eyes tightly, and she could see the man in the brown hole that held him fast around the chest.

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Bell waited longer than he should have for Mattie and Mista Powers to come back. Now as he stood on the front porch in the fading light, there was no reckoning as to which way they went beyond the fence line. He still carried the shotgun that set all this in motion. It swung from his hand like a club. He turned over in his head what direction to set out in, at the same time reasoning out that it would be just as well to wait them out. They had to come back before long. Surely Mattie would see to it that Mista Powers got back.

It finally came to him that there was no way he could sit out the wait. Bell took the time to load the shotgun before he struck out in search of Mattie and Mista Powers. The only direction that made any sense was toward town, and

as Bell made it to the fence line, his way was guided by the flash of black fur that streaked past him in the opposite direction. By the time Bell spun around to catch sight, the cat was gone, and he was left facing towards Mama Lacey's place, which was the only thing between where he stood, and the wetlands. Bell figured he could make it there before darkness settled in, even if he wasn't sure why he was going there. He fought back the urge to call out, not being sure just where Young Powers was out here somewhere. Bell took extra long steps as he made his way in hopes of maybe closing the gap on the pair if they came this way. It shouldn't be too hard to spot them, Mista Powers stands pretty tall, and Mattie is a good size woman. Mattie's broad shape was the only thing Bell could see in the short distance, she was hustling along and all of a sudden she spun back and fixed on Bell's approach. There was no sign of Mista Powers as Bell closed in on Mattie but she was quick to explain. "He kept on off this way to you know where like everything behind him was on fire." Mattie said in one breath. "I did my best to keep up with him." she offered as soon as she got some more air into her lungs. Bell touched Mattie's shoulder in an attempt to put her at ease. He spoke as easy as he could muster. "There's no reason for you to fret, you did

alright.” Bell ushered Mattie along as he picked back up his pace. Mista Powers couldn’t be too far ahead and the night was coming on. Bell no idea what he was going to do once he did find Mista Powers, and he certainly didn’t want to sort it out in the pitch dark. He and Mattie both slowed their steps as the outline of Mama Lacey’s house came into view. There was no light from within to indicate that anybody was home. Bell took notice that Mattie had slowed her pace even more and was almost at stop. He looked back and she locked eyes with him before she spoke. “This is not a place we should be, comes a time to let matters take care of themselves.” Bell tried to take in the meaning of what she was saying all the while he wanted to press on in his search. He was walking almost backwards as he dealt with Mattie. “You feel that way, you stay here, I can’t let the light run out on me.” at his statement, Mattie froze in place. Bell twisted back and was about to set off full speed when the pleading voice in the distance locked his feet to the ground. It was Young Powers, off into the woods beyond the house.

When Bell looked to Mattie she cast her eyes down.

Bell finally got moving, and as he cleared the house where he could get a view to the woods beyond, he saw Mista Powers standing stark still at the

edge of the brush line. Bell did his best to concentrate on the woods as he closed in on Mista Powers, the voice didn't sound too far off, and Bell hoped to get a sense of direction. He was shoulder to shoulder with Mista Powers when the voice came again, it was straight off from where they stood. By any measure it was far enough to where the ground gave way to the water, like it does around here. Mista Powers drew in a loud breath, Bell was sure he was going to speak, but there was nothing. Outside of Young Powers' wailing voice, there was no other sound coming out of the gathering darkness.

Bell was about to set the shotgun down and venture out to take a look when Mista Powers finally did speak. His voice was low and settled, and his gaze never strayed from off into the distance. "No, if he can't bring himself out, then that's where he needs to be." As the last syllable died off, Mista Powers turned ever so slowly and started to walk away.

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Terry opened her eyes to make the vision of the man go away, but that

didn't happen, instead it made the others show up. There were two more men in the distance, standing just outside the woods. A quick series of blinks did nothing to erase the image. Terry could feel Junior watching her as she made her way through whatever was going on. The man in the hole twisted about and all that did was send him lower and lower. Mama Lacey's voice was as soft as a whisper, like she was standing at Terry's ear. "come a time for you to do what you know is right." The words pulled back the urge Terry was fighting to go and help. Then, just as if he heard the same words, the man in the distance started away. The quick fading light did nothing to dim Terry's view. Try as she might, she couldn't turn away. She knew she could call out to the fading figures. Instead, she let the darkness take the vision away.