

**RYAN
MCGINNIS**

**A
GOOD
NIGHT'S
SLEEP**

A THRILLER

A Good Night's
Sleep

By Ryan McGinnis

1

Sam pulled the blinds apart enough to sneak a look out the window. Summer was coming to an end and autumn had just started showing signs of arrival. It was that time of year where the heat of the day was still present but in the evenings and early mornings you could just feel that hint of crispness in the air. That ever so hard to detect chill that would later lead to nights of hot chocolate and bonfires. She looked down across the yard and scanned the road, but to no avail. There was no traffic to be seen, just the empty road and the lake beyond that. Sunlight streamed through the trees and the misty fog had receded back out onto the water where it would stay until dissipating under the rising intensity of the sun.

“See anything yet?” asked Kevin, as he moved past Sam, tickling her as he did.

“No,” she giggled, letting the blinds shut and attempting to swat at her husband as he retreated to the kitchen. “What time did they say they would be here?”

Kevin smiled as he pulled a mug from the cabinet, “For the tenth time, they said they would be here around 9:30, now why don’t you come in here and have a cup of coffee with me? Do you want me to get you a mug?”

Sam sighed as she entered the kitchen. Her husband knew her well, but after five years, he should. “Yes please. Do I have any creamer left?”

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As she entered the kitchen, Kevin was rustling through the cabinets.

"Oh here it is," he said, as he sat the creamer out on the counter and returned to the cabinet to grab a second mug.

A few moments later the couple sat at the counter in the kitchen and sipped on their coffee. Kevin watched as Sam kept glancing at the clock nervously. He reached over and placed a hand over her's and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"It's going to be fine. Everything is perfect. This is what we've worked so hard for. All the paperwork, all the in house visits, everything has led to this and we are going to do fine."

Sam's brow furrowed slightly, "Oh I know. But what if she doesn't like the house? What if she doesn't like us? I just want everything to be right for her."

Kevin gently massaged his wife's hand and smiled. He knew she would be like this. Even with everything perfect, she was going to worry right up until it was done. "It's going to be fine, you'll see. I mean we've already met her and she came to visit with Jackie and loved the house and the yard. Remember how happy she was when she chased Max around the yard?"

Sam's face brightened as she thought of their rambunctious wire hair terrier, "Yeah she did have fun chasing the dog around the yard, although I'm not sure if he was running to play, or just trying to get away from her. Either way it was so sweet."

Kevin laughed, "Yeah and there will be plenty more where that came from. Remember Fall is just around the corner. We can have fires in the fire pit and roast marshmallows."

Sam broke into a big smile, "Oh this is going to be fantastic. I still can't believe we've made it this far. After trying for so long and getting nowhere."

A cloud briefly passed over Kevin's face. He remembered the doctor's visits, the frustration, then the visit where they said it wasn't possible.

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But no need to dwell on that now. The smile returned to his face as he remembered how they had refused to give in to defeat. Just like they always had, they had regrouped and come up with another plan. If they couldn't have a baby, they would adopt. They had entered the program and put all their effort into it. After a long and grueling process, they had been approved and now the day was finally here.

Just then, they heard their dog Max start barking in the other room, heralding, as it always does, the arrival of visitors.

Kevin squeezed his wife's hand one last time as she looked like she was about to pop with excitement. Then they rushed to the front door to welcome their guests.

2

Jackie sat looking around the living room as Lily chased after the Woodworth's dog Max. It was good to see Lily laughing and happy. Losing both parents as Lily had can have such devastating effects on a child's mental development, something that Jackie knew first hand. That was why she had taken such a personal interest in finding Lily the perfect home.

"Would you like more coffee?" asked Kevin, as he rose to go refill his own mug.

"Oh, no thank you. I'm fine." She replied. If she was being honest, she was more of a tea person, but the coffee wasn't bad. Possibly vanilla hazelnut? She couldn't quite place it.

Sam looked up from watching Lily attempt to play with Max, "I want to thank you for helping us get through the process, we couldn't have done it without you."

"I'm just happy that Lily seems to have found a place she can be happy. Poor girl's been through a lot," said Jackie as she sipped her coffee. "I'm just glad to see her open up. She's been really quiet lately. She just sits and plays with her dolls."

Sam glanced at Lily, as Max continued to elude her, "Yeah I was going to ask about that. When we first saw her she was carrying that little case, we almost thought it was a small suitcase. I even joked that she always looked like she was ready to go."

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Jackie nodded, "It's not like that. That's her doll case and she doesn't go anywhere without it. It's almost like a safety blanket or something. Ever since the accident with her parents, she's carried it everywhere she goes."

"Where did she get it? Was it a gift?" asked Sam as she picked up her mug, checked it to find it was empty, and sat it back on the table.

Jackie shook her head, "No. Honestly we're not sure where she got it. One day she just had it. I assumed she picked it up from the toy bin at one of the facilities that she had stayed at."

Just then Kevin returned with a steaming hot cup of coffee. "Watch it Max!" he exclaimed as the dog darted past him and into the kitchen. "I have no idea what's gotten into him. He is so antsy today."

"I've read that dogs can take some time to get used to the idea of 'little adults' running around the house. Remember he has been used to it just being us ever since we got him." Replied Sam. "We'll just have to give him time and take it easy. By the way, thanks for grabbing me some coffee too."

Kevin glanced at the empty cup on the table, "Oh crap, sorry. I was so worried about playing host and keeping up with Lily that I didn't even notice. Want me to grab you some now?"

"Nah, it's fine. I probably don't need any more coffee anyway. I've had three cups this morning trying to calm my nerves." Sam glanced at Jackie, "I've been so worried about making sure everything was right for Lily."

"No need to explain, I get it," replied Jackie. "I've read your case folder, you guys have been through a lot and this is a big day for you, and Lily."

Having given up on chasing Max, Lily climbed up on the couch beside Jackie and pulled her doll case into her lap.

"Hey kiddo, did you give up on catching the dog?" asked Jackie as she

ran a hand through Lily's white blonde hair.

"No luck," said Lily as she frowned slightly. Her hazel eyes looked around the room momentarily as if she was thinking of searching for Max again, before they settled on her doll case.

"Don't worry Lily," said Sam, "I'm sure he will warm up to you. Sometimes he just takes a while. He isn't used to having any friends."

"Speak for yourself, he loves me!" exclaimed Kevin.

"Only because you feed him!" countered Sam as they laughed. She turned back to Jackie, "You'll have to pardon my husband, he's a goof."

Jackie laughed in spite of herself. She loved the connection Sam and Kevin seemed to have. This was going to be a wonderful home for Lily. They seemed so warm and caring, this would be a great place for Lily to grow up. She was pulled from her thoughts when she heard the loud snap of the latch on the doll case beside her.

"What have you got there Lily?" asked Kevin as Lily opened the doll case revealing two small dolls. One was a male wearing a shirt and tie, the other was a lady wearing a pink dress. Lily glanced at Kevin but said nothing before turning her attention back to the dolls. She pulled a brush from the case and started brushing the female doll's hair.

"Those are really nice dolls, do they have names?" asked Sam, hoping to gently pry Lily from her shell.

Lily brushed the female doll's hair before placing it back in the case. She looked back up at Sam and Kevin before replying, "Yes, this is Jim and this is Amy, they are my parents."

3

“So that went well,” said Kevin as he shifted on his pillows, tried them, and shifted them again trying to find the perfect angle.

“Yeah and now she’s settled in for the night in her room, she doesn’t seem scared at all,” replied Sam as she turned off the lights and settled into bed.

Kevin absentmindedly scrolled his phone, “Let me guess, she has the doll case in bed with her.”

“No, but it is right beside the bed on the nightstand,” Sam frowned. “Why do you ask?”

Kevin laid his phone down and turned to his wife, “Oh come on, you don’t think it’s a bit weird that she carries around two dolls that she refers to as her parents everywhere she goes? Isn’t that a bit... creepy?”

Sam shook her head, “Oh come on, this girl lost both her parents, that’s a really big trauma for anyone to go through, much less a small child.”

Kevin shrugged, “Maybe you’re right, I don’t know, it just strikes me as odd.”

Sam smirked, “Oh like you’ve never done anything odd in your life. I figure it’s more like a security blanket or something.”

“Yeah maybe you’re right,” said Kevin as he turned out the light, “I’m

sure she'll be fine. She already seems to be warming up to us. I just wish Max was more welcoming. It's not like him to not be friendly with everyone who comes through the door."

Just then Max sprang up onto the bed and bounded to the top, sticking his nose in Kevin's face.

"Okay boy, I know you heard your name, but get down. I've got a long day tomorrow and we need to get some rest," said Kevin as he gently pushed the enthusiastic dog down to the middle of the bed.

"I swear I wish we had never let him learn to sleep in the bed," groaned Sam as she stretched over and kissed Kevin on the cheek. "Anyway, love you, get some sleep."

"Love you too," responded Kevin as he pulled up the covers and closed his eyes.

The room was quiet except for the white noise generator that the couple bought a few years ago when Sam had struggled with insomnia. After about twenty minutes, Max fidgeted, stood up, spun in a circle, and laid back down. This wasn't an unusual occurrence, the equivalent of an adult shifted from their side to their back or vice versa. Most of the time no one noticed. However, five minutes later, Max got up, spun and laid back down again. Every five to ten minutes for the next hour, Max repeated the same pattern. Get up, spin, lay back down, get up, spin, lay back down.

"Oh for the love of God Max, settle down!" exclaimed Sam, finally exasperated by the dog's near constant fidgeting.

Max ignored her and got up and walked to the end of the bed, staring at the door to the bedroom.

"Hey boy, what's going on?" asked Kevin blearily as he rolled over and watched the dog, who was barely visible in the low light, standing at the foot of the bed.

After a few moments, Max returned to his spot, spun around, and plopped down on the blanket. Kevin rested his hand on the dog for a

few moments to try to calm him down. Max relaxed, and to Kevin, it appeared the dog had finally settled. Then Max's head shot up again, staring at the door. He got up, walked to the bottom of the bed and stared at the door, before walking back up to the middle, spinning around and plopping down, this time right up against Sam.

"Damnit Max!" she exclaimed. "I have enough trouble sleeping without you hip checking me."

She rolled over and kissed Kevin on the cheek, "Honey, I give up, I'm going to the couch so I can get some sleep."

"Okay," mumbled Kevin as he petted the anxious dog. "See what you've done Max? Now settled down so we can sleep."

At some point, the dog either stopped or Kevin's fatigue got the better of him. Either way he fell into a deep sleep and, if the dog was fidgeting around, he didn't feel it. It was a good sleep, the kind where you lose all track of time and space in that magical limbo where everything ceases to exist and you just float. He stayed like that for an indeterminate amount of time, if there is really time or space in your dreams, until finally he was disturbed from the slumber by the distinct feeling of the dog standing on his ankle. Half awake, Kevin rolled over and pulled his foot from under the small dog as it continued to stand at the foot of the bed. He could just make out the lowest of whines coming from under it's breath.

Kevin raised up and put his hand on the dog's back, it flinched, startled by the touch.

"What's wrong boy?" asked Kevin as he struggled to be awake enough to have coherent thoughts. His body had that numb, strange feeling you get when you're startled out of a deep sleep, as if you have a foot in both worlds, the dreaming and the living. His movements felt heavy and his vision blurry. He looked past Max at the doorway and there he saw it, the small silhouette of the girl standing in the doorway.

"Lily? What's wrong honey?" asked Kevin as he rubbed his eyes. When he looked at the doorway again, she was gone. Max walked up and licked him on the cheek as he stared at the doorway. Had he dreamt it? He felt so weird and unsettled from being startled awake, he

couldn't be sure. Uneasily, he slid out of bed onto unsteady legs and crept quietly down the hall to the doorway of Lily's room. There she laid sleeping peacefully, her doll case on the nightstand. Kevin shrugged his shoulders and went back to bed, where he quickly fell back into a deep sleep.

Some time later, he rolled over and felt Lily laying beside him. She reached over and rubbed his shoulder. Just then behind Lily, Sam rolled over and put her arm around her, snuggling the small girl. Lily smiled and laughed as Kevin grinned, the feeling of warmth washing over him. There they were, one big happy family. As he watched Sam and Lily laying in the bed, the thought occurred to him that he shouldn't be able to see them. Their room was normally very dark, except for the light from the hallway. Where was the light coming from? He glanced over to the window where the blinds were open and the moonlight streamed in. Then he saw it. In the corner of the window was the unmistakable silhouette of a man. He couldn't make out any details but clearly there was a man standing outside of their window, looking at them. His heart raced as he tried to get up, but found his body wouldn't move. He tried to turn his head to warn the girls who continued to laugh and snuggle beside him but his neck wouldn't move. He tried to speak but a hiss of air was all that could come out. He felt panic welling up inside him as he struggled to force his body to respond, but it refused to move as if shackled by some invisible chains. Frustrated and unable to scream, his heart raced in his chest as he willed his arms and legs to move, even as they seemed to resist even more. The entire time he could still see the man in the window, watching him as he struggled.

Finally, with a supreme effort, Kevin felt his arm slowly move, as if breaking out of a plaster cast. He forced the covers back off his body and shaking from the effort, forced his body out of bed. As he stood up however, he found that he had forced himself all the way out of the dream and back into the real world as he sprang out of bed. The sudden movement startled Max and he jumped off the bottom of the bed. Kevin cleared the bed and ran into the still closed curtains. He stood, covered in a cold sweat, and felt the curtains and the still closed blinds behind them. As he struggled to slow his breathing he realized it had just been a dream. No one could be looking through their window. The blinds and curtains were closed and their bedroom was

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on the second floor. He glanced back at Max, who had walked up and started licking his shin.

“Sorry buddy, it was just a bad dream, that’s all.” Then he scooped up the dog and tried to settle back into bed, the vision of the man’s silhouette still crystal clear in his mind.

4

“Oh come on Max, give us a break!” sighed Sam as the dog had gotten up to readjust his position for the third time in less than hour.

Kevin reached over and tried to calm the dog, “I don’t know what his deal is. This is the second night in a row he’s been agitated. He finally calmed down at some point last night. Then I had that crazy dream and startled him again.”

Sam readjusted her pillows as Max once again settled down between them, “I’m glad I wasn’t in here for that. I slept like a baby on the downstairs couch. Did you give the dog a calming treat?”

“Yeah, hopefully it kicks in soon. It would be nice to actually get some sleep,” replied Kevin as he rested his hand on the dog’s back.

After a while, the dog settled down and the couple drifted off to sleep. The house was quiet except for the occasional creaks of the house settling and the white noise generator they kept by the bed. Kevin awoke several hours later and rolled over onto his back. He could hear the dog quietly snoring. He secretly liked these peaceful moments in the middle of the night. He laid there for some time, listening to the dog continue to snore. Sam had settled in, sleeping on her left side, facing away from him, as she normally did when she fell into a deep sleep. Just then, he thought he heard her mumble something and she reached back behind herself and felt his arm. She touched it ever so lightly, like she was probing, testing to see whether it was real. She relaxed her grip and pulled her arm back. Kevin reached over and

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stroked her back, as he often did when he thought she might be troubled. To his surprise, she rolled over onto her back and sighed, rubbing her face as she did.

He reached over and put a hand on her shoulder, "Everything okay?" he asked quietly.

She sighed again, as if trying to shake off the sleep enough to speak, "Yeah, I just had the weirdest dream."

"Oh yeah?" said Kevin, thinking about his dream the night before. "What was it like?"

Sam shook her head slightly, "I don't know, it was so strange. It's like I could see, even though my eyelids were closed, but everything was tinted red. There was this man standing beside the bed. I could just see his silhouette. He reached out and started holding my hand. I honestly thought it was you, until I realized you were laying behind me. I tried to say something to him when I reached back to feel your arm, but nothing really came out. Then he was gone and I woke up."

"Whoa, that's really strange," replied Kevin as he remembered his own dream about a strange man the night before. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Sam said as she readjusted. "It was just a dream," with that she slid over, kissed him on the cheek and rolled over to go back to sleep.

Kevin laid there a little longer, thinking about the strangeness of the two dreams, but eventually he drifted off into a light sleep.

A little while later Kevin awoke. His wife had left the bed at some point. He figured she had trouble getting back to sleep and had moved to the downstairs couch. Honestly the couch was one of her favorite places to sleep and it wasn't unusual for her to sleep there several times a week. As he laid there, trying to find his way back to slumber, he felt something. It was a strange feeling, like a radio wave being beamed at him. He felt a tingling and couldn't quite place it. Finally, he raised up slightly in bed. There in the doorway to the room, stood Lily.

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“Lily honey, are you okay?” asked Kevin as he rubbed his eyes. But when looked back at the door, she was gone without a trace. Kevin rubbed his eyes and sat in the bed for a few moments, before laying back down and readjusting himself on his pillows. Slowly he eased back into unconsciousness.

At some point he became aware of the pressure. It was slight at first, just a little snug, he thought it might be the dog laying on the covers. The little dog may only weight fifteen pounds but he felt like a bowling ball when he was dead asleep. Then it became tighter still, increasing to the point that it hurt. He tried to roll over, only to find the covers were tightly wrapped around him and constricting further with every second. He tried to move, but his body was wrapped tight. His arms and legs pinned to his side. His heart rate raced as he struggled to try to move, but his body wouldn’t respond. He tried to move his head, which wasn’t even under the covers, but it held fast just the same. He tried to speak but his mouth wouldn’t move. Even his tongue was frozen, as if an invisible gag had been thrust into his mouth. Frustrated beyond belief, he tried to speak again but only a hiss of air came out. The tightness was becoming unbearable. Kevin tried his best to strain against the covers, or was it his own body holding tight? He didn’t know, and the panic that was welling up inside him threatened to swallow him whole. He thrashed back and forth, attempting to break loose.

“Why can’t I move? Why wasn’t Max waking up? Can’t he feel me struggling?” The thoughts raced through Kevin’s head as he felt the covers wrap tighter still. He was starting to have trouble breathing, his chest unable to expand against the ever increasing pressure. Kevin tried to thrash again, pushing as hard as he could against the covers, and his own body. His heart felt like it would explode out of his chest as he struggled to break out. The feeling of being trapped in his own body threatened to overwhelm him, when suddenly the covers relaxed. He awoke in a cold sweat, his chest heaving as he breathed in the cool night air. Max lifted up his head and surveyed the situation for a moment before laying back down. Slowing his breathing, Kevin checked his phone. It was 4:30 am, there would be no more sleeping tonight.

5

The following day Kevin sat at his desk at Anderson & Associates, a local financial planner. He had spent most of the day avoiding the boss and generally hanging out at his desk. After the disastrous night's sleep and the intense nightmare toward the end of the night, Kevin was having trouble keeping his eyes open, much less concentrating on his day's work. Fortunately it had been a fairly slow day and once his boss left at 4:30, Kevin waited the customary ten minutes and then slid out himself, relieved to have made through that impossibly boring work day.

On the drive home he zoned out, not even paying attention to the chatter of talk radio that was his normal routine. He was still focused on the weird dreams that had seemed to take up their nights. He knew they were just dreams but for some reason he couldn't shake the eerie feeling that they were connected somehow. He shook his head, now he was sounding like someone who hadn't had enough sleep. He turned into his neighborhood and as he was making the left onto their street he saw his neighbor Agnes checking her mail. Agnes was retired and after her husband passed last year, Kevin and Sam had taken to having a weekly dinner with her. However, because of the preparations for Lily's arrival they had been forced to put that tradition on hold for now. Agnes saw Kevin and waved so he pulled over onto the curb and got out of the car.

"How's the little one?" asked Agnes as she gave Kevin a hug.

"Oh, she's fine. She appears to have settled right in. Max still seems

freaked out by her, but other than that everything is good,” replied Kevin.

Agnes looked Kevin over and frowned, “You look like you’ve seen better days, are you sure everything is alright?”

Kevin shrugged, “Well I mean other than all the sleep I haven’t been getting. Otherwise everything else is good.”

Agnes laughed, “Oh welcome to the wonderful world of parenting! Once my young ones were born I didn’t get a good night’s sleep for almost sixteen years.”

Kevin couldn’t help but laugh at the old woman’s humor. But then he interjected, “Well believe it or not, it’s not Lily that is causing us to have sleepless nights. Sam and I have been having these weird dreams lately. Between that and the dog being skittish we haven’t slept that much.”

Agnes looked thoughtfully at Kevin and rubbed her chin, “Well, as far as the dog goes, I’m sure it’s just not used to having to share attention with anyone else. You know how that goes. Plus I’m sure it’s freaked out by a small, faster moving human in the house.”

Kevin grinned at the thought of Max being chased around the house by Lily, “Yeah that’s true. She thinks she is working hard to be his friend but it’s probably just freaking him out.”

“Yes, all he knows is the smaller one is loud and unpredictable,” laughed Agnes before calming down and looking Kevin over, “Now, tell me about these dreams you’ve been having.”

Kevin looked at the ground as he kicked a small rock around with his foot, “I don’t know, it’s going to sound weird, I mean it’s probably nothing.”

Agnes poked him with her finger, “Oh come on, you think I haven’t heard just about everything under the sun? Sometimes talking things out are the best way to get it off your mind.”

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Kevin thought about it for a few moments before he looked up and sighed, "Okay, here it goes, but promise not to laugh, or think I'm crazy."

He went on to tell Agnes about the dog acting freaked out, Lily appearing in the doorway, the man at the window, the man that Sam thought she saw and the sleep paralysis nightmare. All the while Agnes nodded thoughtfully, occasionally rubbing her chin. When he was finished she stood staring off into space, her brow furrowed in deep thought. Then she finally turned and looked at him with a grin forming on her face.

"Bless you child, there's nothing strange about what you're experiencing," she said as she placed a hand on his shoulder. "You and Sam have taken on a large burden, trying to give this child a home. This can put a lot of pressure on someone who isn't used to dealing with children. I've already told you what is going on with the dog, so don't worry about that. As far as the rest goes, are you even sure you're awake when you see the girl in your doorway?"

Kevin thought about it for a moment, "Well, I've thought I was awake, but I've had some really vivid, realistic dreams lately so I can't swear to it."

Agnes nodded, "Just as I thought, you seeing her in the door way is you worrying about not being there for her when she needs you. Same thing with the man outside the window. You worry you won't be able to protect her."

Kevin scratched his head, "Wow, that actually makes a lot of sense! But what about the sleep paralysis or the weird dream that Sam had?"

"Well you said she thought it was you? Maybe she was just looking for comfort or security." Agnes thought for a moment before going on, "As far as the sleep paralysis, that one is easy, now that you have a family and a lot more responsibility, you feel boxed in, like you're trapped. Maybe deep down you're scared of fatherhood. Just give it time, you'll get more comfortable with it."

Kevin thought about everything Agnes had said. It made a lot of sense

now that he thought about it. They had been under a lot of pressure and maybe subconsciously he was wrestling with his new found responsibility more than he realized.

“Thanks Agnes, I don’t know what we would do without you. I feel so much better now,” said Kevin as gave her a quick hug. “I’m going to head home and talk to Sam about what you told me. I’m sure it’ll help her too.”

Agnes waved as he got in his car, “It’s no problem! Say hello to the little one for me, I can’t wait to meet her!”

Kevin smiled as he started to close the door, “Will do! We will have you over just as soon as Lily is settled in!”

He pulled off the curb and drove the short distance down to his house, which was just down the hill and in the curb from Agnes’ place. He had worried about telling Agnes about the dreams. Worried she would think he was crazy, but instead she had explained it all away and now he felt relief and was excited to see his new family.

6

The rest of the evening had been splendid, even bordering on perfect. Kevin had come home excited to talk to Sam about what he and Agnes had talked about. It all made sense, their insecurity in taking in this child, their worry that they wouldn't be up to the task of caring for her. Sam had felt so relieved when they spoke about it outside while Lily was napping. Once she awoke, they cooked dinner and hung out on the couch. Even Max had seemed to settle down. He still wouldn't let Lily near him but he had calmed down enough that he would sit on the same couch with her, even if it was on the opposite end.

Kevin ran his hand through his hair as he settled into bed, "Tonight has been such a relief, it's been like night and day."

"Oh I know," agreed Sam, as she lazily scrolled her phone. "I think maybe we're starting to get over our nerves. Lily seemed so happy tonight. And Max, you were such a little gentlemen," she said as she ruffled the fur on top of the dog's head. Max yawned and rubbed his face with his paws in response.

Kevin watched the dog groom it's face over and over before settling in between them, "Yeah Max has seemed really calm tonight. Maybe we'll finally be able to get some sleep."

"Well I'm taking no chances," said Sam as she reached for the bottle of sleeping pills she had set out earlier. "Want one?" she asked, as she held the bottle out to Kevin.

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“Oh, no thanks, I don’t think I’m going to need any help. I’m exhausted.” He yawned and turned out his lamp. “I’m not even reading tonight, I’ve got to get caught up on my sleep.”

“Yeah, I agree,” said Sam as she returned the bottle of pills to the night stand and turned out her light. “It’s been a rough couple of nights, I’m looking forward to hopefully getting some proper sleep.”

Kevin rolled over and kissed his wife, “Love you, I think you’re going to be a wonderful mother. Good night.”

Sam smiled a huge grin, “Thanks hon, I think we’re going to be a great family. Love you too.” And with that, they settled in for the night as the room grew still and slumber over took them.

Sam was sleeping soundly when she became aware of something. It was a feeling, deep in her consciousness, like a faint nudge somewhere. Not enough to wake her, just enough to pull her out of her deep sleep. Slowly, even though her eyes were still shut, she became aware of her surroundings. Through the dull red glow of the inside of her eyelids she could make out her nightstand and dresser faintly. She relaxed in the warmth of the glow, floated in it blissfully, as any worries she felt melted away.

She was unaware of how long he had been standing there, how long he had been holding her hand, it all seemed to just fade in. She turned her head and focused on the black silhouette that stood beside the bed. She tried to focus on his features but could not. It was all just a sea of black, deeper than midnight on a moonless night. She had seen him before. Several nights ago he had visited her. In her hazy consciousness, dulled by the sedatives, she couldn’t remember anything about the first encounter other than the fact that there had been one. Or had there? She seemed to have trouble focusing on anything in the warm haze. For the first time, she noticed his eyes, they seemed to glow like two beacons on a stormy sea, piercing her, looking not at her but into her, deep into her soul. She didn’t remember those eyes, and now she could never forget them.

“Come with me,” the voice was deep, reverberating somewhere deep in her soul.

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She struggled a bit, unable to pull her hand out of his, the warmth overcoming her, soothing her. She realized she couldn't struggle, it would be ridiculous to do so. Indeed she wasn't sure where she ended and he began. But wasn't there someone that she should be reaching out to for help? She couldn't remember anyone or anything else. It was as if her world had never existed, it had only been him, it had always been him. She felt herself melting into him as well, her will dissolving as surely as her reality.

"Come with me," said the voice again, it's tone echoing in every cell of her body. Every molecule ached to comply.

Slowly, quietly, she slid out of bed as he led her out of the room.

An undetermined amount of time later, Kevin stirred as Max nudged him by accident while stretching. He reached over and felt Sam's side of the bed. His wife was nowhere to be found. He shook his head. They really needed to get a new mattress. Sam spent at least several nights a week sleeping on the couch. They had talked about getting an adjustable mattress but with the expenses involved with adopting Lily, they had decided to put it off. Oh well, it would be fine. Some nights he thought she liked sleeping on the couch better than sleeping in the bed. He reached over and rubbed Max's back. The dog was snoring peacefully, a huge relief after the last few nights. Just as Kevin was starting to relax, he felt a feeling, like someone watching him. He looked up and there, standing in the doorway, was Lily. He rubbed his eyes warily but she remained there, silently watching him from the doorway.

"Lily honey, what's wrong?" asked Kevin as he held out a hand and motioned her in. She entered the room and walked to Sam's side of the bed.

"I can't sleep. I had a bad dream," she stated matter of factly, as she stood at the side of the bed.

Kevin pulled back the covers on Sam's side and motioned her in, "That's okay, it happens. You can sleep in here. Max gives off enough heat for both of us, he'll have you snoring in no time."

* * *

Lily caught his hand and he pulled her up into bed. She snuggled in under the covers, when suddenly Max jumped up, leaped out of bed and walked down the hallway.

"Max? Where are you going?" asked Kevin as he sat up for a moment. Part of him wanted to run after the dog, but he was exhausted. He figured he startled Max when he pulled Lily into bed. He would be back.

"Where did the doggie go?" asked Lily with a look of concern.

"Oh, I'm sure he just went to check on Sam. He'll be back," said Kevin as he rubbed the top of the young girl's head.

"He doesn't like me," replied Lily, still with a look of concern on her face.

"Oh, I'm sure he likes you just fine. He just takes a while to warm up to people, you'll see," replied Kevin as he smiled at the little girl. She snuggled in next to him and grinned.

Feeling like he needed to dispense some fatherly advice, Kevin turned to the girl, "Listen, I'm sorry you had a bad dream. But you have to realize that it's just a dream and dream's can't hurt you."

Lily smiled at him and shrugged, "I know, my parents used to tell me that too, before they left. They used to have all kinds of bad dreams. I would hear them talk about it."

Kevin was puzzled at the matter of factness of this tiny girl. He reached over and adjusted her covers, "Well your parents were right, bad dreams can't hurt us and you have nothing to fear. We'll take care of you. Now let's get some sleep."

Lily smiled, "Okay, night night."

With that Kevin laid back, closed his eyes and quickly fell deep asleep.

A few hours later Kevin was startled when he felt the covers begin to

tighten around him. Last time it had been a subtle feeling, a gradual, steady tightening. This time it had come on suddenly as if he was trapped in a snare. He tried to slide his arm but it had already been trapped in the ever tightening grip. He tried to move his head, but he couldn't move. His heart rate shot up as he felt panic kicking in. Even with the added adrenaline, he couldn't find a way to move. It was like his entire body had went stiff on him. He strained in the confines of his body as he felt the covers continue to aggressively constrict. It was getting difficult to draw a breath as the sheets drew tighter still around his chest. His lungs felt like they were going to burst, deprived of the oxygen they so desperately needed. Anxiety welled up inside him, a cold sweat breaking out all over his body as he struggled against the pressure. He tried in vain to move his lips, to force his tongue free, to scream out anything to get help. Where was Sam? Where was Max? Why couldn't Lily scream and get help? Was she even safe? He struggled against the pressure of the covers and managed to turn enough to see her peacefully sleeping out of the corner of his eye. He strained even harder still, he had to wake her, she had to get help. But the covers wouldn't allow it as they constricted even harder, snapping him back straight. The sheets and covers wrapped tighter around him with a new found intensity. As the pressure continued to mount it felt like it was going to squeeze the very life from him. He felt the air leaving his lungs, forcing his mouth open.

"Eram quod es, eris quod sum!"

The words erupted from his lips before he knew what happened. He forced his mouth back shut, confused over what just happened. Those weren't his words, where had they come from? He felt like he was losing control. Why had he said that? What had he said? What if he wasn't just losing control of his body? What if there something else inside of him? Kevin thrashed as much as he could, trying to break free. He had done it the night before, he could do it again. In desperation, he remembered something he had read about cognitive dreaming and how you could take control of your dreams. With great effort he started breathing slowly, in and out as much as he could, while counting the spaces between breaths. At first the covers continued to tightened and the pressure continued to intensify, but eventually he felt them begin to unwind and his panic began to subside. Suddenly he awoke, sitting straight up in bed and throwing

the covers back off his upper body. The room was completely still except for his breathing. He sat in the darkness, feeling the coolness wash over him. His shirt was completely soaked and his hair wet like he had just come in out of a rain storm. He look over beside him and saw Lily looking at him with a puzzled look on her face.

“Hey sweetie, it’s okay, I just had a bad dream. But we need to get out of bed and go find Mommy,” said Kevin, the sweat still glistening on his forehead.

Lily frowned, “But I was just getting comfortable,” she said with a pout.

Kevin suddenly felt something grasp his feet and pulled him under the covers with alarming speed. As he slid under the covers he saw that the bottom of the bed appeared to be further down than it should be. He tried frantically to grab at the covers but nothing could stop his momentum. All he could see in the chaos was a pair of clawed hands holding his ankles, pulling him toward what appeared to be a dark hole near the bottom of the bed. Just as his feet and lower body entered the hole, he grabbed onto the side of it, clinging for dear life. He glanced over the side and caught a glimpse of a hideous woman with gnarled teeth and unkempt hair. Her eyes, blood shot and wild, glared at him, piercing to his very soul. He was so stunned by the eyes, his grip let go and he plunged downward into the darkness.

7

Agnes walked out her front door to retrieve the morning paper. It was one of those slightly crisp, but still comfortable mornings and the fog that had rolled in overnight off the lake was just starting to retreat. She walked out to the curb and scooped up the paper, thankful that they hadn't thrown it in a puddle again. She'd been meaning to talk to them about that, maybe she would get around to calling them today. She straightened up and took a sip of her coffee, savoring the slightly bitter aromatic brew. She tightened her sweater and started to turn to return to the house when she saw something out of the corner of her eye. She turned and looked down the street at the Woodworth's house. Through the fading morning mist it looked like the front door was ajar. She squinted harder and could just make out a tiny figure sitting on the front steps.

As she got closer, she could now see a small blonde girl, still in her pajamas, sitting at the top of the steps, sipping orange juice in one hand, and petting Max with the other. She looked up as Agnes approached the bottom of the steps.

"Hello, you must be Lily. My name is Agnes, I've heard so much about you," said Agnes as she smiled at the small girl.

"Hello," said Lily as she raised her glass to have another sip of orange juice.

"Lily, where are Kevin and Sam?" asked Agnes, as she glanced past Lily at the open door.

* * *

"They're gone," replied Lily with a shrug of her shoulders.

"Do you mind if I look around the house?" asked Agnes as she put her foot on the bottom step.

"Sure," replied Lily as she rubbed Max's ear.

"Keep an eye on her Max," said Agnes as she walked past the child and into the house.

Agnes did a quick sweep of the house and saw no signs of either Sam or Kevin. The covers on Lily's bed were thrown back, as were the covers in the master bedroom. Other than that, nothing was out of place. There wasn't even a sign that Sam had slept on the couch. She returned to the front porch where Lily continued to sit and sip on her glass of orange juice.

"Sweetie, where did Sam and Kevin go?" asked Agnes as she sat down on the steps beside Lily and Max.

"I don't know. When I woke up, they were just gone," replied the little girl, who continued to stare out at the fog over the lake.

Agnes sat for a few moments before walking back into the house and calling 911 on her cell phone.

Forty five minutes later, the officers had also swept the house as well as the grounds and found no sign of either adult. Officer Evans approached Agnes, who offered him a mug of coffee that she had made while trying to keep herself busy.

"Thanks for the coffee. We've searched all around the house and the yard and, other than the open front door, we've seen no signs of foul play," the officer explained. "When was the last time you saw them?"

Agnes paused for a moment, as if pondering what to say. "Well that's just it officer, I think I saw them last night. I was having trouble sleeping and I got up to get a drink of water. When I looked out the window, I saw what looked like Sam and probably Kevin walking

down the driveway toward the lake. They crossed the road toward the lake and I lost them in the mist. At the time I thought they were just out for a late night walk but now I'm not so sure."

The officer pulled out a notepad and jotted down the information. "I see, why do you say 'probably Kevin'?"

"Well," Agnes started, "I could tell it was Sam from her hair cut. The other one I assumed was Kevin, but truthfully he seemed a bit too tall ." Agnes shrugged, "I mean it could have been him. My eyes aren't what they used to be. I just could've sworn the person I saw was taller. I'm just not sure."

The officer nodded and jotted down a few more notes on his pad. "So we understand that the girl was recently adopted?"

Agnes glanced at Lily, who was sitting with another officer on the front porch, "Yes sir. What will happen to her?"

The officer shook his head, "Unfortunately we have to call it in. Her social worker will come pick her up. Whether or not they are found, they've probably lost the child. She'll have to go back into the system."

8

Later that day, Jackie sat at her desk typing up the report. That morning she had gotten the call and drove up to the Woodworth's house. She had worked so hard to vet the couple so that Lily could have a good home and then this happened. How could she have been so wrong about them? When she arrived at the house she found Lily hanging out in her room playing with the dog. She had talked to the neighbor who found Lily, what was her name? Agnes? Yeah that's it. She said she thought she might have seen the Woodworth's leave the house in the middle of the night. Who does that?

She sighed heavily as her coworker, Sally walked into the office and sat down across from her.

"Rough day?" Sally asked she handed Jackie a doughnut she had picked up in the break room.

"Yeah," responded Jackie, as she looked up from her computer. "I met these people, they were nice people. This morning the cops got a call and came out to find the house wide open and Lily sitting by herself on the front porch."

Sally shook her head as she chewed her doughnut, "Oh no, not poor Lily again? That girl has had a rough go of it."

Jackie sighed as she reached back and tried to work a kink out of her neck, "Oh don't I know it. First her parents disappear and are presumed dead, now her first set of foster parents go missing too. You

know they think they drowned?"

Sally leaned in, "No? Really??"

"Yeah, the neighbor said she saw them walking toward the lake in the middle of the night. The police went and checked and found a single set of prints going into the lake. They searched the area and couldn't find any coming out so, for now at least, they are assuming they went for a midnight swim and drowned," replied Jackie. Just then, her stomach growled and she realized in the all the rushing around she hadn't eaten. She reached for the doughnut that Sally had laid on her desk.

"Gone for a swim?" asked Sally. "Seriously? It was sixty three degrees last night! Who goes for a swim in that kind of weather?"

"I don't know what to tell you," replied Jackie as she tore off a piece of doughnut. "I just know what they told me. They still haven't confirmed what happened to the man, since they only found one pair of tracks and based on the size, it was the wife."

Sally sighed, "Well either way, that poor girl. I just cannot believe her luck. Speaking of Lily, how is she? She must be shaken up."

Jackie shook her head as she was finishing another bite, "Well that's just the thing, she seems fine. Almost oblivious. I'm chalking it up to shock. It has to be. When I picked her up you would've thought I was just coming over for a visit. She seemed totally chill and still does."

Sally sat back in her chair and stared at the ceiling, "That's so weird. I cannot imagine how messed up that poor girl is going to be from all this. Where is she now?"

Jackie pointed over her shoulder, "She's back in the children's holding area. I fed her earlier and she's been content to just sit in there and play. I asked her if she needed company, but she told me that she was fine. She's is so quiet and polite."

Sally got up and peeked through the blinds at the children's holding area, a small room with two chairs, a couch and toys of all varieties.

“Yeah, for as young as she is, she seems way mature. Must be what she’s been through.”

In the children’s area Lily sat on the couch. Jackie had tried to get her to play with some of the toys but they really didn’t interest her. Instead she sat on the couch, her blonde hair in pig tails, wearing her favorite blue dress, and meticulously went through and groomed each of her dolls. One by one she brushed their hair and straightened their clothes, making them all just right. When she was finished, she placed them each in her doll case and lined them up just right. She pleased at the job she had done and to her they looked perfect. She sat the still open case on the end of the couch and looked over her handy work. Four perfectly groomed dolls, two men and two women, sat in her case looking back at her.

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a contagion called Tears of the Dragon, that could wipe out the global population. They plan to release it on the world, causing untold chaos and destruction. But when? Where? Xavier finds himself in a race around the globe to uncover their secrets and get to them before it's too late.

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Chapter One

Marcus Jamali sat in the oppressive heat of an Arizona morning fingering the road dirt on the dashboard of his black SUV. He hated this place, the heat, the dirt, the blinding sun, but the dust was the worst. The air-conditioning had died a few days ago so they had been riding around in the blazing heat, up and down the highways with the windows down. That combined with the dry conditions had covered the inside of the truck with a thick layer of dust. He reached for his water bottle, checked to find it empty, and chucked it into the floorboard. As miserable as he was, Marcus felt lucky. The individual they had been in pursuit of had managed to lose them. Because of that, they had wandered around in the god-forsaken desert for the last two days. Just when his crew had started getting antsy they had gotten the call that their target had been spotted in Wingfield, Arizona. Soon after they had arrived in town, set up surveillance, and soon had him in their sights. Now with any luck they could wrap this up and get back on schedule.

While waiting he watched across the street as an old man locked up an ancient, dilapidated garage. The structure, much like the man, seemed to sag and sink in an eternal state of submission. The man, breathing

heavily, locked the door and stuck the keys in his dingy coveralls before wandering to his late model car and driving away.

“So this is what the American Dream has come down to?” thought Marcus.

“Poor bastard, worked all his life and what does he get? Ground down by the machine. At the end of it all he’s left with poor health and a business that can’t survive the reckless economic greed. A couple of days ago we had the solution. A couple of days ago we could have relieved the suffering and set it right. But then he showed up and ruined it.” Marcus paused at the thought of the stranger, who had shown up out of the blue and snatched away their achievement at the very cusp of victory. The mere thought of him and the trouble he had caused them made his blood boil.

Just then, he received a text that their target should be coming into his line of sight anytime now. Marcus looked around at the dilapidated, mostly abandoned, warehouses around them. They had picked the perfect area for this to go down. Once a busy industrial section, this side of town had seen hard times and was now full of abandoned buildings and shells of former bustling industry. He looked down the street and immediately saw their target. You couldn’t miss him honestly. Despite the heat the slender figure was

dressed in a black suit and a skinny necktie. Between the suit and his slick hair Marcus figured he looked like an extra from a mobster movie. He moved quickly down the street with a duffle bag slung over his arm. The thought he might actually be carrying what they were looking for in the duffle bag disappointed Marcus. This man had led them on a chase across the Southwestern United States and nothing would make Marcus happier than to have to 'interrogate' him to find out where he had hidden their property.

Suddenly, the stranger veered off course and crossed a short parking lot. He stopped in front of an old warehouse, fidgeted with the lock and then opened the door. He stopped for a second to look back at the street and then slipped inside and shut the door. Immediately Marcus and his team sprang out of the SUV and moved across the street, where they were met in the alleyway by Victor and Peter, who had been tailing their target through town on foot.

"I've checked the back exit, it's chained shut. This is the only way in or out" said Victor.

Marcus nodded "Okay this is how it goes down, we use small ordinance only. Do not shoot unless you have to, we want him alive. We hit the front door, split up and take him down." The other five men nodded and checked their earpieces and sidearms. On Marcus'

signal they quietly opened the door and rushed inside.

Dust hung heavily in the air and coated everything inside the old warehouse. The smell of mold, decay, and rotting wood filled the place. They hung back in the dark shadows of the dimly lit warehouse letting their eyes adjust. Marcus knew that their prey must know they were inside. He was in here somewhere hiding, but Marcus wouldn't rush it, this had been a long, miserable chase and he was going to relish finally reaching the end of the trail. He signaled the other five to spread out and each take an aisle. They would continue the sweep until they flushed him out, then the real fun could begin.

Marcus slowly made his way down the aisle between the tall shelves. Each shelf was covered in a variety of old industrial equipment. Between the junk all over the place and the dim light from the dirty skylights, Marcus could barely see. Suddenly Victor's voice came over his earpiece, "Marcus, we got a problem!"

Marcus barked back "Maintain radio silence! You know the drill!"

Victor's voice came back quieter this time, "Peter's dead."

Moments later Marcus stood with Victor over Peter's body. Victor was crouched over the body

looking it over with his flashlight.

“Broken neck” said Victor as he swept his light over the lifeless body that had minutes ago been their comrade.

Marcus snorted “What the hell? Pete’s a professional, no way that Las Vegas reject got the jump on him.”

Suddenly the silence of the dusty warehouse was shattered by two gun shots. Marcus and Victor raced toward the sound of the gunfire and couldn’t believe the sight they found. Two more bodies were laying in the aisle. Blood slowly seeping from the gunshot wounds in their heads. Just past the bodies they saw the stranger, his back to them, with some sort of cable or cord wrapped around the only other member of their team left. Marcus hit the spotlight on the end of his gun, illuminating the stranger’s pale skin.

“Don’t move! Let him go!” screamed Marcus.

The stranger glanced over his shoulder but showed no sign of letting up. Marcus nodded to Victor and they both closed in on the target, fingers tightening on the trigger as they approached. Suddenly, at almost the precise moment their fingers squeezed the trigger, the stranger spun with incredible speed so that their shots hit their own man in the chest. Marcus could only stare in horror as the man dropped to the ground.

The stranger had vanished.

“What the hell? Nobody is that fast!” Victor moved forward, sweeping his light back and forth.

“Wait!” said Marcus, but it was too late. There was a sudden movement in the shadows off to Victor’s right. Marcus heard what sounded like metal slicing through the air and Victor suddenly dropped to the ground in a heap. In the dim light Marcus saw something roll across the floor toward him. When he played his light down he saw Victor’s head at his feet. Marcus felt panic well up inside him, as he stumbled backwards away from his partner’s severed head. He swung his light to the right and suddenly the stranger appeared in front of him, his steely eyes staring a hole in Marcus. Before he could squeeze the trigger, there was a flash of metal in the flashlight beam. The flashlight wobbled wildly, throwing the beam all over the room. Marcus tried to steady it but couldn’t. He glanced at it and saw his gun hand falling to the floor. He heard the slicing sound again and suddenly everything started to fade. Briefly Marcus felt the sensation of falling and drifting past himself and then all was dark.

Xavier Greene stood over the body of Marcus Jamali, watching the blood pour from the stump of his neck. It oozed across the floor in the dim light, slowly

filling the cracks in the old wooden floor. He reached down and turned off the spotlight on the gun. Then, moving quickly, he picked up a rag and wiped the blade of his katana clean. Reaching back, he slid the sword up into the holster that he wore on his back under his jacket. When the blade was as far as it went the tang compressed allowing the katana to shorten further and fit under his jacket. Xavier looked at the chaos around him. He didn't have time to clean up, even in this abandoned part of the city someone may have heard the gunshots and he would have to leave the area immediately and get back to his true hideout. He quickly retrieved his duffle bag from a random shelf among the junk and started toward the front door. He paused for a moment, looking back at the warehouse and opened the door. The sunlight immediately blinded him and before his eyes could adjust he heard "Freeze! Yavapai County Sheriff Department!"

Xavier blinked his eyes, trying to adjust to the bright sunlight. As his sight recovered he saw three young, thin deputies and an older, overweight Sheriff, his considerable bulk threatening to bust the buttons on the shirt of his uniform.

"May I help you officers?" said Xavier, eyeing the officers.

The rotund sheriff stepped forward “I’m Sheriff Fredrick Thompson, we’re responding to reports of gunfire in the area, is this your building?”

“No, I’m afraid not. I’m a building inspector, Xavier Greene, hired to look this place over. It’s in really bad shape, I’m afraid.”

The sheriff eyed Xavier wearily, “Like every other building on this block, if the city had the money they would probably tear this whole place down.” He looked Xavier over carefully, “Say, you’re not from around here are you?”

“No, I’m from back east, just traveling with work. You know how it goes in this economy.” Xavier offered up the best smile he could muster.

“Well, fair enough,” replied the sheriff, “mind if I take a look around before you lock it up?”

“Of course, feel free.” Xavier replied.

As the sheriff walked slowly into the warehouse Xavier felt a tightness growing in his stomach. His mission was important and he could easily take out the rookie deputies and sheriff but he had always been against harming the innocent, and even though these officers were in his way, they were merely doing their duties. Just then a young deputy approached Xavier.

“Hi I’m Deputy Culpepper, you can call me Jimmy.” Xavier smiled weakly and shook his hand.

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience, I'm sure we'll have you on your way in no—"

Suddenly they heard a crashing sound and the Sheriff burst from the warehouse. "HOLY SHIT!" exclaimed the Sheriff, panting and wiping his now heavily sweating brow. He pulled his gun and pointed it at Xavier. "Sheriff, what the hell is going on?" asked Jimmy, clearly perplexed.

"Get back, get away from him!" stammered the sheriff. "Get your hands up!"

Xavier dropped his duffle bag to the ground and calmly lifted his hands. The Sheriff instructed Jimmy to cuff Xavier, while the other two deputies went through his bag.

"I'm sure I can explain everything officer," said Xavier as he calmly allowed Jimmy to place the cuffs on him. Jimmy searched Xavier and pulled a pair of knives from his jacket, as well as a pouch containing a pack of pills, a cable hidden in the arm of his jacket, and the sword hidden behind his back.

"Are you sure about that?" asked the sheriff. "You have the right to remain silent and in my opinion, from the looks of things, and what I found in that warehouse, it would be in your best interest to do so."

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About the Author

Ryan McGinnis grew up reading Science Fiction, Horror, and Suspense Novels at the local library. Ray Bradbury, Kurt Vonnegut, and Ian Fleming all loomed large over his childhood. He has previously written the short story “Sketch”, which is available on Mandatory Midnight, and “A Good Night’s Sleep”, which is available at his website, ryan-mcginnis.com. His Debut Novel, “Tears of the Dragon” is available on Kindle, Kindle Unlimited, as well as Paperback.

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