

Dark Rite

By David Wood and Alan Baxter

Praise for Dark Rite

“Wood and Baxter have delivered a stunning tale that reminds of an early Stephen King’s talent for the macabre with a pinch of Graham Masterton’s flair for witchcraft and terror. A sinister tale of black magic and horror – not for the faint hearted.”

Greig Beck, bestselling author of Beneath the Dark Ice and Black Mountain

“When Grant Shipman returns to Wallens' Gap for his father's funeral, he discovers a curious book and a supernatural relic hidden from the malevolent townsfolk, who shelter generations of malignant secrets. After his friend Cassie is kidnapped and his own life increasingly threatened, Grant must confront the powers of darkness, a demon summoned for the ultimate sacrifice.

With mysterious rituals, macabre rites and superb supernatural action scenes, Wood and Baxter deliver a fast-paced horror thriller.”

J.F.Penn, author of the bestselling ARKANE thriller series

"Wood and Baxter have taken on the classic black magic/cult conspiracy subgenre, chucked in a toxic mix of weirdness, creepshow chills and action, and created a tale that reads like a latter-day Hammer Horror thriller. Nice, dark fun."

Robert Hood, author of Immaterial and Fragments of a Broken Land: Valarl Undead

Works by Alan Baxter

The Isiah Duology

RealmShift

MageSign

Stand-Alone Works

Ghost of the Black: A Verse Full of Scum

Dark Rite (with David Wood)

Works by David Wood

The Dane Maddock Adventures

Dourado

Cibola

Quest

Icefall

Buccaneer

Atlantis (forthcoming)

Freedom (Origins Series)

Stand-Alone Works

Into the Woods (with David S. Wood)

Callsign: Queen (with Jeremy Robinson)

Dark Rite (with Alan Baxter)

Apocalypse Tales

The Zombie-Driven Life

The 7 Habits of Highly Infective Zombies (forthcoming)

The Dunn Kelly Mysteries

You Suck

Bite Me (Forthcoming)

Writing as David Debord

The Silver Serpent

Keeper of the Mists

The Gates of Iron (forthcoming)

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Dedication

Dedicated to our loyal ThrillerCast listeners.

Chapter 1

The unrelenting blanket of green shrouded the world as far as the eye could see. Only a sprinkling of snow atop the highest peaks broke the monotony. Somewhere in this wilderness was the turnoff to Wallen's Gap. At least, that's what the map promised, though the GPS had other ideas. If the device was to be believed, the little town sat isolated between two mountains to the west with no means of ingress or egress. It was as if the forest had wrapped its arms around the town and refused to let it go.

His cell phone vibrated and he took it out, surprised he actually had coverage in the middle of nowhere. Voicemail. He must have caught a brief moment of reception. He punched up the message and pressed the phone to his ear.

Grant, it's Suzanne. I was hoping you'd answer. Listen, I know this is a bad time and all, but I couldn't bring myself to tell you before you left. I mean, you just found out about your dad and all.

Long pause.

I think we need to take a break.

A longer pause.

No, I can't drag this out. I'm moving out. I've put up with your stupid dreams long enough. You never finish anything, Grant, ever. You start something, it gets tough, you quit. We both know this music thing is just going to end up as another of your failures. You'll do it for a while, something will go wrong, or you'll get discouraged, and you'll be moving on to the next pipe dream. I want to be with somebody who's actually going somewhere in life. There are things I want and you

can't give them to me. Anyway, I really am sorry to tell you this way. Hope things go okay in Virginia.

Grant ended the call and tossed his phone onto the passenger seat. He stared ahead, stunned as the trees zipped past on either side. Three years together and she couldn't even tell him to his face. What the hell? Maybe she was right. Perhaps a college degree and a safe career choice would be better for his future. He had a vision of himself trying to teach anthems to hormonal teenagers in a high school band and the very thought made him itch all over. He was a damned good musician and he would make it. Screw Suzanne. She'd be sorry when she saw him rocking out arenas. Besides, he'd loved his guitar a lot longer than he had loved her. But the coldness of her message shocked him. His GPS flickered and he cursed. He rapped on it twice before realizing what was really going on.

“You have got to be kidding me.”

Blue lights flashed in his rear-view mirror and with them came the icy feeling in the pit of his stomach that always accompanied a traffic ticket. “Haven't seen a damn soul for miles and the first person I meet is a cop.” Could this day get any worse? He hadn't been speeding but, with all the attention he'd been paying to his phone and GPS, he had doubtless had trouble staying on his side of the center line on the winding mountain road.

He scanned the roadside for a place to pull over but there was precious little space. The mountain rose up to his right at a steep incline and to his left fell away into a dark valley. The cop was riding his ass now, and cold sweat trickled down the back of Grant's neck as he wondered if the guy was getting impatient with him for not pulling over right away. What was he supposed to do? Stop in the middle of the road?

He was about do to that very thing when he spied a turn-off to his right. He winced as the encroaching shrubs scraped the paint job on his '68 Camaro. Finally far enough off the road to feel safe, he killed the engine and, careful not to make any sudden moves, took his wallet from his back pocket.

He turned to roll down the window and gasped, jerking involuntarily and dropping his wallet. A dark shape loomed in the window, gleaming teeth bared. Heart pounding, he blinked and the image came into focus. A man in a beige uniform, mirrored shades, and a wide-brimmed hat. How had the cop gotten to Grant's car so fast?

Still grinning, the cop tapped the window with a yellow fingernail.

“Sorry,” Grant called, cranking the handle for all he was worth, wishing for an automatic window. “I'm a little lost and I was trying to look at my...”

“Just get your license and hand it to me, son.” The cop had a nasal voice with a touch of mountain twang, but his big hands and authoritative manner chased away any feelings Grant might have had of city superiority. His name tag read “J. Barton.”

He handed over his license, proud that his hands weren't trembling. Biting his lip, he waited for a chance to explain himself and possibly ask for directions, but was hesitant to be the first to break the silence.

Barton held the license up. “Grant Shipman,” he read aloud. He pursed his lips and tapped his chin. “You Andrew's boy?”

Grant's heart sank. “Yes, officer.” His mouth was dry and his voice scratchy.

“Sheriff.”

“Sorry, Sheriff. Yes, Andrew was my dad.” He paused, searching Sheriff Barton's face to see if the admission had any obvious impact, but could see none. “I'm headed to the memorial service, but the road to Wallen's Gap isn't showing up on my GPS. I was trying to look at it and check my directions. I know I shouldn't do that when I'm driving.”

“Damn shame about your daddy.” Barton handed back Grant's license. “Damn shame. He was a good man.”

“Thank you.” There wasn't much else Grant could say. He and his father had never been close, and the elder Shipman had moved to Wallen's Gap a long time ago.

“You going to see to his affairs? His house and the like?”

“I suppose so. But not until after the funeral, of course.” Grant grimaced. He didn't relish the thought of sorting through a dead man's

possessions, especially a man whom he felt he should have known better, should have cared for more deeply.

“It's just a dirt road into town from this side of the mountains. You'd best follow me.” Barton turned and strode back to his patrol car.

Grant sagged against the headrest, took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly. He had avoided a ticket and found himself a guide to town. Perhaps this day was about to get better.

Cassie took a deep breath and stepped into the community center beside the tiny Wallen's Gap supermarket. Her heart hammered and her nerves made her angry. She needed help and wouldn't let pride get in the way.

“Hello, Cassie.” The gray-haired woman at the desk greeted her with a smile that was more genuine than her too-white dentures.

Cassie ground her teeth. Everyone knew everyone in this tiny craphole of a town. “Hello, Mrs. Golding.”

A moment's uncomfortable silence hung in the air.

“You'd like to see the counselor?” Golding eventually asked, her voice gentle.

Cassie nodded, not quite able to meet the woman's eye.

Golding stood, favored Cassie with a kind smile, and stepped away down a corridor. Moments later she returned. “She's free. Second door on your left.”

Cassie tried not to roll her eyes. The only counselor in a small town where half the people thought psychology to be just one of the many tools of the devil wasn't likely to have people beating down her door for appointments.

The woman in the office had a familiar face, but Cassie couldn't place her. “Cassie Brunswick, is it? I'm Doctor Houghton. Please come in and sit down.”

Cassie took the offered seat. Houghton. She'd gone to school with a Clare Houghton, but they had never been close. This must be Clare's mother. She took in her surroundings in a quick glance: a sofa and chair, a tiny bookshelf stuffed with self-help books, and a spartan, metal desk,

neatly organized, above which hung a framed diploma from Stuart College. Two whole hours away! By Wallen's Gap standards, this woman was a world traveler. Cassie supposed she should get on with it before she changed her mind. "Everything we talk about is confidential, right?" she asked.

Houghton took a pad and pencil from her desk and sat in a chair opposite. "Yes, absolutely. You can be open and honest and nothing needs to ever leave this room. Unless I think you're about to commit a crime or harm yourself. That's not the case, I presume. Is it?"

Cassie shook her head and stared at her hands in her lap. She'd bitten her nails down to the quick. Her grandmother would have had a fit. The room seemed to press in on her as she searched for words. She had no idea where to start.

"It's all right," Houghton said softly. "Tell me what's on your mind."

"I've been seeing this boy, Carl." She stopped, unsure again.

"How old are you, Cassie?" There was no trace of judgment in the woman's tone.

"Just turned eighteen."

"Carl is twenty, isn't he?"

"Twenty going on twelve." How had she not seen what an immature jerk he was? She'd known from the start he was broken, but didn't count on just how badly.

Houghton nodded, and scribbled on her pad. "Take all the time you need."

"Well, it's just everything really." Inside, a floodgate opened. "He scares me and he's always getting wasted, he smokes so much weed, and has all these stupid ideas about stuff. I want to break up with him, but he says he couldn't live without me. And he says I need him too." She stopped, dragged a breath in, determined not to cry.

Houghton laid the pad on her knees. "Let me get this straight. You'd like to end things with Carl, but he makes you think you can't leave him?"

Cassie nodded.

"You can, you know. You can do anything you want."

Cassie made a derisive noise that was half-cough, half-snort. "Oh sure. Anything I want. Like what? I can't go anywhere. I can't get out of this stupid town. Besides, nobody would like it if I left him."

"What do you mean?" The counselor frowned.

"Never mind." Cassie gazed at the floor.

"Has he hurt you, Cassie?"

"No." Heat prickled the back of her neck and she felt the same old urge to defend the loser. Her loser.

"Have you two had sex?"

The boldness of the question shocked Cassie briefly, but she bit it down. "No. Well, not actual sex, no. I never have."

Houghton jotted something down. Cassie imagined the woman writing EIGHTEEN YEAR-OLD VIRGIN in big block letters and almost managed a smile.

"Has he pressured you about that?"

"Not exactly. It's kind of weird. He likes to, you know, fool around." Her cheeks burned at the admission. "But he doesn't push me to go farther. I don't want to anyway, but every guy, you know, wants to. It doesn't make sense. He acts like he doesn't want to go all the way with me, but he wants to own me or something. He always wants me to get him off. But never all the way. I don't really want to be with him, but when I start talking about us maybe taking a break, he gets so mad. I'm scared most of the time." The last bit came out in little more than a whisper and Cassie dropped her gaze to her clasped hands.

Houghton nodded, scribbled again on her pad. "You know, you don't have to be scared of him. You can..."

"I'm not just scared of him," Cassie interrupted.

"What else?"

Cassie paused, breathing deeply again. It was harder than she thought it would be to talk about the real problem. The real fear. "He says I sleepwalk." The word seemed so inadequate.

"Do you?"

"Maybe. He says I sleepwalk and he has to try to get me back into bed without freaking me out or anything. That's another thing that's been

holding me back. Carl says if I leave him, who's going to look out for me at night then?"

"So you sleep together? Share a bed, I mean?"

Cassie nodded. She was still looking at her hands and couldn't see the woman's face, but she thought she registered a note of mild disapproval. Typical for this town. Just about every girl got initiated in the back seat of somebody's car during her freshman year, but as soon as they became parents themselves, you'd think they'd worn a chastity belt until they were thirty.

"I do sometimes. I usually stay at home, but I don't want to be there when Daddy gets really drunk, so I crash at Carl's."

"Do you sleepwalk at other times, when you're not at Carl's house?"

Cassie couldn't say anything, a lump of nerves sitting heavy in her throat like a cold rock.

"Cassie?" Houghton's attention was fully upon her now. The note pad lay forgotten on her lap.

"Sometimes I wake up and my feet are muddy. Once my nightshirt was all torn and there was blood on it."

Houghton shifted forward, elbows on her knees. "Blood?"

"I couldn't find any cuts or anything." Cassie bit her lip, not sure if she should say the rest. Then again, what was the point of seeing a counselor if she didn't spill her guts? She blurted the words out before she could change her mind. "I don't think it was my blood."

"Whose was it then?" Houghton articulated each word in careful, measured tones. The woman was trying too hard not to sound judgmental.

The tears started despite Cassie's best efforts. "I don't know."

Chapter 2

“Another book about the Templars. Big surprise.” Grant tossed the volume into a box that already contained the works of Dan Brown plus a variety of fiction and non-fiction titles along the same theme. He'd sorted through roughly half of his dad's library. At first, he inspected each book carefully, even flipping through the pages in search of hidden cash or important documents, but an hour's futile efforts convinced him to give it up as a bad job.

The next book was a thick, heavy tome, cracked with age and the stamped gold letters on the spine faded. He held it up to the light and read the words aloud. “Demonology and The Bible.”

Frowning, he flipped through the pages, trying to get a feel for the content. The title made it sound like a Christian book of some sort, but the contents put him to mind of a horror novel. He stopped at a black and white print showing a demon hunched over the supine body of a naked young woman who lay bound to an altar. He didn't know what unsettled him more: its rapacious expression or hers of terror. A shiver ran up his spine and he had the sudden urge to toss the book into the fireplace and burn it. The momentary irrationality passed and he put it in the box with the other religious books.

He'd hoped that, in the process of settling his father's affairs, he'd learn a little something about the man who had been an enigma to him for so long. So far, all he'd determined was his father loved his home in the mountains, his conspiracy thrillers, and apparently liked to read about religions, no matter how obscure. Or how sinister.

Grant stared into space as his thoughts drifted back to Suzanne. His stomach iced slightly at the thought of her packing up all her stuff and leaving. They had been together a long time. It was hard to imagine that she had just up and left like that. Then again, they'd been high school kids when they first started dating, and they'd had problems from the start. Everything he did stressed her out: his decision to drop out of college, his string of part-time jobs, his musical pursuits, his band

practices, his seedy gigs. Meanwhile, she pursued corporate greatness, going to school year-round, earning her business degree after only three years, and recently accepting a boring, entry-level job at some faceless corporation in an equally faceless glass building. Come to think of it, he didn't know where she worked or what she did, aside from the fact that it involved a lot of bitching at the dinner table. He hadn't thought they were as doomed as she had suggested. Clearly he had been quite naïve there. Now he was all alone. *You never finish anything!* Her words haunted him.

Two razor sharp knocks on the door jolted him out of his emo moment and he grimaced as he stumbled to answer, awkwardly navigating the clutter he'd created in the spacious living area. Who could it be? He didn't know anyone and who, aside from the cop who'd stopped him, even knew he was here? He reached for the knob and hesitated, visions of Deliverance-style hillbilly perverts flashing through his mind. He dismissed them with a rueful laugh and opened the door.

No one was there.

He cocked his head to the side like a confused dog and stepped out into the cool mountain air. There was no car in the driveway, save his own. He strode out onto the front porch and peered out into the woods. Nothing.

“Hello?” His voice sounded weak and tentative, so he summoned his inner thug and tried again. “Somebody fucking around out here?” That was better, though not by much. It suddenly occurred to him that anyone who was messing with him wouldn't answer back. In fact, whoever had knocked might be sneaking around back at this very instant. He stepped back inside, shut the door harder than necessary, locked it, and looked around for a weapon. His dad's Civil War era musket, complete with bayonet, hung above the fireplace. Nice. Now all he needed were cartridges, lead balls, and an inkling of how to load and fire the thing. He hurried into the kitchen area and, in a drawer full of tarnished silverware, found a carving knife with a long, triangular blade. It would have to do.

He moved to the back door and peered out the dirty window. If trees were out to get him, he was screwed, because that was all he saw in any

direction. Clutching the knife, he opened the back door and moved out beneath the canopy of the forest that grew right up to the back edge of the house. He strained his eyes and ears, but neither saw nor heard anything. He was alone. It must have been a tree limb knocking against the side of the cabin. That or his imagination running wild.

There it was again. This time there was no question about the knock. He heard it clear as day. In a flash he was off, sprinting around the corner of the cabin. In the time it took to think, *At least I'm not running with scissors*, he was there.

And he was alone.

“No freaking way.” He kicked at a loose rock and sent it bounding across the clearing in front of the cabin. The forest floor was carpeted in a thick layer of dry leaves. There was no way anyone could have run away that fast without him at least hearing them. He made a circuit of the cabin, looking for footprints but found exactly what he had expected--nothing. More unnerved than he cared to admit, he returned to the cabin and began gathering his things. He'd head to town, grab a cup of coffee and a bite to eat and clear his head. At the last second he grabbed the old demonology book that had caught his attention earlier. He didn't know why, but he suddenly wanted it out of the house, or maybe it wanted out, or something equally irrational. In any case, he shoved the book into his backpack.

He kept the knife too.

The interior of *Cup-of-Joe* was as grimy as its plate glass front window where chipped paint advertised the “Best Cup of Coffee in Town!” Faces turned toward Grant as he entered and all stared with mingled curiosity and disdain as he ordered and took a seat. Their conversations slowly started up again when he refused to meet any of those inquisitive eyes. *Fucking hick town*, he thought to himself. *If they were dogs, they'd all be sniffing my ass right now*. He'd be glad when the funeral was over and he could clear up and get out. Maybe he should just pile everything up in the woods and set it on fire, leave the cabin an empty shell, and get a real estate agent to sell it.

The thought had occurred to him that having a cabin in the country might be nice. He wasn't really the rural type, but he appreciated peace and quiet, nature, clear skies and fresh air. But this certainly didn't seem like the place for it. Maybe he'd sell out, take the proceeds and buy a little place somewhere else. Somewhere less... inbred.

The waitress put his coffee and eggs on the table and gave him a friendly, if distant, smile. "Anything else?"

He returned the smile, shook his head. "No, thanks." A thought occurred to him. "Say, did you know Andrew Shipman?"

The waitress's friendly face turned sad. "Sort of. Not really. My daddy knew him, from when they were in the lodge together. Terrible that he died. So young for a heart attack."

Grant nodded, now wondering why he'd asked. "Was he a... I dunno, was he a nice guy?"

"I guess so." She pursed her lips and cocked her head. It was a cute look for her. "Like I said, I didn't really know him, but he was always friendly, always had a grin on his face when he stopped in."

A part of Grant wished he knew his father better, but only a small part. The bastard walked out on Grant and his mother years ago and all the memories from before that were bad. Perhaps it was easy to feel guilty now the man was dead. Perhaps he needed some kind of closure, though he doubted he'd find it out here among the mountains and trees. He tried to imagine the old man as a regular member of the community. "You said he and your dad were in the lodge together? What lodge?"

The waitress giggled. "You know, the Freemasons." She made a face like she was imparting a great secret. "Secret societies and covert men's business."

Grant laughed and a man at the counter cleared his throat altogether too loudly. The waitress jumped and hurried away. Annoyed, Grant turned to look and the fellow stared at him with hard, dark eyes. He was a bear of a man, with a red and blue checked shirt stretched tight over bulging, muscular arms and a swollen beer gut. Grant held his eye for a few very uncomfortable seconds but the bear was obviously not planning to look away. More frustrated than ever with this backward community,

Grant turned back to his food. He cursed his shaking hand as he forked up lukewarm eggs.

Keeping his attention away from the hicks, and determined not to give them the satisfaction of leaving right after his lunch, Grant ordered a coffee refill and sat back in the chair. To give himself something to do he pulled out the demonology book. Inside the front cover he found an inscription he hadn't noticed before:

*Brother Andrew,
May the demons always be outside your circle.
In darkness and disorder,
Your Brothers and Sisters of Kaletherex.*

Grant furrowed his brow. What the hell was Kaletherex? And if they called him Brother Andrew, was this a gift from the Freemasons the waitress had just mentioned? If so, what did “Brothers and Sisters” mean? In Grant's limited knowledge, the Freemasons were an all-boys club. A sick feeling rising in his gut, he thumbed through the pages, keeping his body between the leatherbound volume and the others in the diner. He didn't want them to see it, to know he had it. If it felt sinister to him, no telling what these hillbillies would make of it. He wondered what they would have made of his dad had they known about the old man's interest in demonology.

The door bell jingled as a young, pretty redhead came in. Her downcast gaze didn't conceal her red eyes and puffy face. Their eyes met and he flashed her a tight smile. She seemed surprised, gave the merest nod and hurried past. He watched her faint ghost reflected in the plate glass window as she ordered a coffee and took a seat at the table behind him.

She had a creamy complexion, full lips, and body that had not yet succumbed to the local fare of chicken-fried everything. In fact, she was the first person he'd seen in this town whose immediate forbearers, he could be certain, weren't closely related. Maybe this place wasn't all bad after all. Forget Suzanne. Maybe he'd fool around with a mountain girl

while he was in town. He hadn't been with another girl since their Junior prom. Might as well get something good out of this trip.

But the thought of Suzanne dumping him so casually was still a knife in the gut. He turned his attention back to the book and continued to flip through, the pictures growing increasingly horrific. Hideous creatures did despicable things to terrified victims. He read occasional passages about true names, binding incantations, genealogy, as if these things were real. He didn't know jack about the Freemasons, but he was sure this book was not Masonic. Two pages turned at once under the weight of something between them and a yellowed photo slid out. Maybe a bookmark.

The picture showed three men in long robes, with heavy rope belts. Hoods sat piled on their shoulders as they smiled broadly at the camera, each with their hand on the hilt of a large knife, buried guard-deep in the carcass of a goat. Grant stared, horrified, at the grinning face of his father staring back. The man in the middle of the three had a large, heavy-looking medallion hanging low against his chest, the only difference between himself, Grant's father and the man on the other side.

A gasp broke Grant's reverie. He looked around to see the pretty redhead, hand before her mouth in shock, staring at the photo over his shoulder.

He laughed nervously, stuffing it back between the pages. "Just an old film still, I think," he said, sounding fake even to himself.

The girl jumped up and ran from the diner, half-eaten sandwich and full cup of coffee forgotten. The bell on the front door clattered as she banged through.

Grant sat frozen for a moment before sweeping his things back into his backpack, tossing a ten on the table, and running after her. As he left, he noticed the big man at the counter scowling with undisguised contempt. What was his problem?

The girl hurried down the street, almost running. Sure, the picture was creepy, but why cut and run like that? She glanced back, spotted him, and picked up her pace.

“Wait a minute!” Grant called, moving up behind her. “Excuse me,” he said, putting a hand on her shoulder. “Are you okay?”

She jerked away, whirling about to face him. “Just stay away from me!” She backed away from him like he was a rabid dog.

Grant held his hands up in front of his shoulders, palms out. “Look, I didn't mean to scare you. It's just that you seemed really shocked by that picture.”

At the mention of the photograph, she blanched. The girl said nothing, turned away and continued down the street.

“I'm really sorry,” Grant called after her.

She didn't look back.

Chapter 3

The Wallen's Gap Public Library occupied the corner of Main and Oak like a homeless man begging for change. It might have been a nice place back in its heyday, but the peeling paint and crumbling mortar made Grant a little nervous about closing the door too hard when he stepped inside. Past the threshold, the familiar smell of dusty tomes calmed his jangled nerves. A faded poster of President Bush, the first one, greeted him with a sun-bleached smile and the words, "A Thousand Points of Light." Bush the Elder held a copy of either *The Sun Also Rises* or *The Sound and the Fury*--the poster was in such bad shape it was hard to tell.

"Can I help you?" The speaker was an elderly woman with a face like a Venetian blind and shockingly yellow hair. Her tone said she had little interest in assisting anyone. She stood behind a battered mahogany counter topped by a stack of romance novels. He wondered if she was reading or preparing to re-shelve them.

"Yes, I was wondering if you have a public computer I could use. With internet access," he added. No telling what sides came with your entrée and what was a-la-carte around here.

One of the folds on the woman's face puckered into a disapproving frown. "You have to have a member number to log on to the system."

"Okay, can I get a number?" He put on his most winning smile.

"You have to have a library card to get a member number."

"Great! Can I get a library card?"

"You have to fill out a form and show identification." Her voice was so dull and her expression so flat that he honestly couldn't tell if she was trying to give him a hard time or not.

"Okay," he said, working hard to keep his tone friendly, "where can I get a form?"

"You can download it from the website."

Cracks formed in his calm demeanor and the back of his neck prickled. He gritted his teeth and was formulating a suitable reply when

the woman actually cracked a tiny smile. Had he uncovered actual humor in this town? Alert the media!

“Or you can get one from me.” She slid a form across the counter and even provided a pen without being asked.

He completed the form and handed it back along with his driver's license.

“Shipman,” she mused. “You any kin to Andrew Shipman?”

“My dad.” He was afraid to say more. What if his dad had been as unsavory a character as the photograph seemed to indicate? No telling what his reputation had been in such a small town. But the sheriff had called Andrew a “good man.” Grant didn't know what to think.

“Are you living in his place now?” Her tone and expression remained neutral.

Fearing some rule about not giving library cards to out-of-towners, he answered in the affirmative. A few minutes and a donation to the elementary school library later, he was the proud holder of a Wallen's Gap Library card. He stifled a guffaw when he saw his membership number was a whopping three digits long. Not too many readers around here.

The computer kiosk only held three units, but they were up-to-date and the internet connection crisp. He began with a simple web search:

Brothers and Sisters of Kaletherex

His shoulders sagged when he saw the results.

Your search- brothers and sisters of Kaletherex- did not match any documents

He tried “kaletherex” alone and in combination with “wallen's gap” but achieved no better results. He hated to admit failure so quickly. He considered for a few minutes, and a thought sprang to mind that sent a chill down his spine. He set his jaw and typed in “andrew shipman brother of kaletherex wallen's gap.”

This time, he got a single hit. It was a cached document containing the phrase “Brother Andrew Shipman.” No mention of Kaletherex, but it was something. He clicked the print icon and heard the whir of the printer... behind the front desk. Lovely.

He logged off and hurried over to the desk, taking out his wallet as he went. He wasn't sure why, but he didn't like the idea of the woman knowing what he was looking at. She handed the paper to him, her eyes passing only a quick glance across it before she handed it over. He thought he saw the ghost of a shadow pass over her face, but it could have been his imagination.

“Twenty cents, please.” She held out a withered hand.

He handed her a dollar bill.

“I don't have change.” She didn't sound the least bit apologetic. In fact, she looked affronted that he didn't have two dimes in his pocket.

“That's okay. You can owe me.” He gave her his best conspiratorial smile, but she just stared at him. “Uh, keep the change. Thank you for your help.” Duly cowed, he let her disapproving stare chase him out the front door.

Out on the street, he took a deep breath of mountain air. Foremost in his mind was a single thought. The red-haired girl in the diner had reacted to the picture of his dad. She knew something. He had to find her.

Reluctant to go back to the cabin early, Grant wandered around the block from the library. Across the way, a playground occupied a scrubby patch of grass and windblown dirt. He smiled as he caught a flash of red hair. Could he be that lucky? He stopped at a lamppost, acting as if he read the printed sheets in his hand while he covertly watched the redhead. It was definitely her, playing with two little girls who looked like twins in floral print dresses, their chestnut hair tied in bunches. They couldn't be more than four or five years old. The redhead pushed them on swings and chased them from one piece of play equipment to another. She looked to be having fun, but something about her demeanor made Grant a little sad.

He drew a deep breath, hoping he could talk to her rather than scare her off. He started across the road, forming what he hoped was a pleasant and friendly smile on his face. She saw him coming and scowled, glanced quickly to the twin girls and back again. She looked like a rabbit, cornered and ready to bolt.

“Hey,” Grant called out, as casually as he could. “You're the girl from the diner, right? I'm Grant.” He dared a broader smile, hoping it would work better on her than it had on the librarian. No such luck.

Her eyes narrowed. “Cassie.” She seemed a little reluctant to give him even that single word.

“These your sisters?” he asked, still trying to be friendly but not pushy.

She shook her head. “My neighbor's girls. I baby-sit.”

“We're not babies!” one of the twins said in high-pitched indignation. She folded her pudgy arms and tapped a foot in disapproval. Grant wondered where she'd picked that up.

“Of course you're not, sweetie. It's just a figure of speech.” Cassie favored the girl with a smile and, for a moment, the weight lifted and it looked like the sun shone on her face. But only for a moment. She looked back to Grant, eyes wary. “You're Andrew's son.” It wasn't a question.

He nodded. “You know him?”

She shrugged.

“I didn't really know him at all,” Grant said. “He wasn't much of a dad. He left when I was little and never came around after that.”

Cassie gave a half-smile. “I wish my dad would leave sometimes.”

“Yeah?”

She clammed up again. Grant looked uncomfortably around the park, across the road to municipal buildings, along to the corner dominated by a tall brick building with a bright white facade. His roving eye paused as he caught sight of the square and compass motif. Block letters raised in the stonework read *MASONIC TEMPLE*.

“That's where they meet,” Cassie said quietly, making him jump. She half-smiled again at his discomfort.

“They?” he asked.

“Loads of the men in town. Freemasons. They think they're some hot shit secret society or something. Losers.”

“Your dad among them?”

She nodded. “And yours. Well, he was...”

“Yeah, I know. I found some of his stuff at the house. Just the men?”

Cassie frowned, scuffed her ragged sneaker in the dirt. “Yeah. Womenfolk not allowed apparently.”

“Do the women have a society of their own?”

She barked a laugh. “Not unless you count gossiping after church or at the grocery store.”

Silence descended again. Cassie watched the twins run and play. One of them swept past with a swish of dress and said, “We live next door to Cassie!”

“So I heard.” Grant smiled at the little girl, momentarily charmed by the precociousness of youth.

“Right next door to the church!” the girl announced seriously, like this was essential information.

Grant smiled. “That's nice.”

“Run along and play,” Cassie said, her voice a little hard.

Grant saw her expression was guarded. Perhaps she didn't like the girl blurting out where she lived. He decided to change the subject. “I'm sorry that picture bothered you earlier.”

Cassie's face closed, like a shutter had come down. “It's nothing.”

“Sure. But even so, sorry about that.”

“I just didn't like it, that's all.” She seemed spooked.

Grant felt bad for her, but clearly something else was happening here. She knew more than she was letting on. “Did you recognize any of the people in that photo?” he asked. “Besides my dad, I mean.”

Cassie opened her mouth to speak and another voice cut across them.

“This guy bothering you, Cass?”

A tall, rangy guy, with greasy hair in a scruffy ponytail strolled up to them and laid an arm across Cassie's shoulders, a blatant act of ownership. She flinched ever so slightly at his touch. He wore a grubby, checked flannel shirt and jeans that looked as though they'd never been

washed. Heavy, scuffed workboots made his feet look three sizes too big for his skinny legs. His eyes were red and droopy, his mouth a little slack.

Enjoy your lunchtime bong? Grant thought to himself, but chose not to say anything.

“No, he's not,” Cassie said, looking at Grant. Her eyes seemed to hold a warning.

The newcomer was about Grant's age, maybe a year or two older than Cassie. “We were just having a chat about nothing,” Grant said. “I'm new in town.”

“That right?”

Grant nodded, unsure where to go from there. “My dad died recently. He was a local here.”

“That right?” the stoner said again.

Grant couldn't repress a slight smile. *Such witty repartee!* He held out a hand. “I'm Grant. Grant Shipman.”

The stoner's eyes narrowed. He shook hands, though without any real conviction. “Carl. You Andrew Shipman's boy? *He* died recently.”

This guy was a real Sherlock Holmes. “That's right. Did you know my dad? I didn't know him well at all.”

“You need to leave my girlfriend alone. C'mon, Cassie.”

Cassie shook his arm off as he tried to turn her around. “Carl! I can't go anywhere, I'm watching the girls.”

Carl seemed to find the situation suddenly difficult, his face twisting into a confused frown. Grant swiftly sized things up. If Carl felt like his authority was being tested, he looked the sort to react badly to it. Cassie couldn't go anywhere, so Grant would need to break the tension. He clenched a fist, tempted to break the tension by breaking this loser's nose, but bit it down. His temper was another thing that stressed Suzanne out.

“Anyway,” he said quickly, “I'd better be off. Gotta lot of stuff to do up at my dad's old place. That's where I'm staying for now.”

He gave Cassie a reassuring smile, sneered at Carl, and strode off across the scrubby park without waiting for a response. There was something very uncomfortable between those two and he didn't want to

get Cassie in any kind of trouble. And if Carl was anything other than stupid, it was trouble. Frustrated, he headed back to where he'd parked his Camaro, wondering what kind of answer Cassie would have given about the photo if they hadn't been interrupted.

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