

**KID NAPPER**

**by**

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Penelope totes the heavy eyed two-year old Jason into his bedroom. He is a twenty-two pound exhausted sack of extreme cuteness. Normally a non-stop perpetual motion machine which according to the laws of thermodynamics is impossible. But the terrible twos are generally impossible. For now, a body at rest stays at rest, unless it is set in motion. Exactly the opposite of what this babysitter is seeking to accomplish. Which is put this human hamster wheel to bed.

Penelope has been taking care of Jason for over a year now and knows when he finally shuts down it is generally until morning, so she'll have the rest of the evening to study her chemistry homework for her test tomorrow. She's in her senior year of high school and hopes to finish in the top two percent of her class. Acing this test can get her there. Jason's folks will be in pretty late so she planned on sleeping over herself.

As she carries him through his bedroom door rapid flashes of lightning assaults the room through the window like gunfire, warning of the looming thunderstorm. It strobelights the toddler's walls glancing off the colorfully painted balloons and cheery cartoonish circus animals. During the day the caricatures brighten the atmosphere with a joyful playfulness. But in this gloomy dreariness it dresses it with a sense of macabre and frightening ridicule.

Penelope glances around and shudders, she never liked this room at night. *Who would adorn a child's room with these nightmarish paintings?*

She hugs the baby against her chest, more because she is uneasy rather than needing to console the child. Jason's warm body against hers gives her a kind of security blanket that may not instill courage, but definitely offers comfort.

The room is dark again, save for the yellow light drifting in from the hallway's single bulb. She holds the baby out. His eyes closed now as he drifts off into peaceful La La Land oblivious to the threatening storm.

*Must be nice to be able to sleep through anything.*

She gently places the baby in its crib and lays his little Winnie the Pooh blanket over him. She gazes at this tiny angel hoping one day she'll be a momma tucking her baby in and not just a baby sitter. *Look at those chubby cheeks and pouty kissable lips.* "Sweet preciousness dressed in a baby suit," Jason's mother laughed one day. Penelope had to agree standing here watching him sleep.

The eight o'clock night sky growls a thunderous deep roll. Penelope can feel the vibration in the very marrow of her bones causing the hair on her arms and back of her neck to rise. She heads to the window to see the roiling clouds ominous against the Stygian night. Large raindrops begin to pelt against the glass. Again, lightning flashes across the seething nightscape. She takes a step back, as if it is coming for her.

She pulls the curtains closed and turns back towards the sleeping infant.

She freezes.

Even her breath refuses to exhale. Her eyes don't have words to relate to her brain what she is witnessing. A dark slender figure resembling an elderly man bends over Jason's crib. A strange wispy ethereal silver cord like a spaghetti noodle being slurped up from a plate rises from the sleeping child to the man's lips. As he inhales the glinting thread, Penelope, paralyzed by the sight, notices how the aged stranger eerily becomes younger looking.

In the silverish glow, right before her eyes, his body straightens, his hollowed cheeks fill out. His sparse grey hair thickens turning black as coal. The last of the thread disappears through his lips.

He turns towards her, his sunken eyes fill out, and become vibrant, full of life. What was moments ago an emaciated bent over skeleton of a figure now stands before the girl, a young, healthy, vibrant man.

Then it morphs again into the baby Jason she just put to bed.

Penelope wants to move, wants to run to the baby and pick it up so she can convince herself this is just a dream. A nightmare. But her feet won't budge, even as her mind races to try and make sense of what she is seeing.

The figure that is Jason now offers her a smile. But it's not his wonderful bubbly smile that lights the whole room up when he runs in. It's more of a wicked smile. Something wholly unlike what that innocent little boy would ever express.

As he stares at her his eyes turn reddish orange like two small embers left over from a campfire refusing to burn out. Then, all at once, as if someone pours a bucket of black watery soot over his head, he dissolves down and becomes a murky feline form. A black cat now stares at her with those same red glowing embers for eyes. Again, the hair rises off her body, knowing she is peering into two windows of hell. The devilish cat dissipates and vanishes into the still air of the dim room leaving behind an acrid smell that causes the girl to snap out of her frightened stupor.

And just like that, a gasp escapes from the stunned sitter's lips. She pinches her nose trying to cut off the sudden smell of decay and death. Her eyes well up as the fear that chained her feet releases its grip. She only wants to get to the baby. To make sure he is alright. Perhaps it was just a nightmare and shadows in the room played a sick trick on her. At least she hopes so. Prays so. Her feet unfix themselves from the spot she was cemented in and her voice box releases one word.

"Jason!" she blurts.

She darts forward, almost lunging towards the crib, her only thought is to scoop up the sleeping infant to see if any harm has befallen it. But when she gets to the child, instead of her hands picking him up, they shoot to her face in horror. The healthy baby she laid to rest moments earlier lies drained of its life force. It has taken on the countenance of the horrific stranger, eyes blackened and sunken in its sockets. Its once pinchable rosy cheeks shriveled and thin, wrapped on its skull like the skin of an overcooked turkey. The child's body drawn up, twisted on itself as if it had fought to keep its soul from being sucked out, but lost. Jason now resembles a mummified body broadcast from an archaeological dig on one of those National Geographic specials.

Penelope spins away repulsed from the ghastly sight, and wretches all over the floor.

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Revolving blue and red lights slice across the single-family homes in this middle-income neighborhood. Multiple police cars and a red Rescue vehicle park helter-skelter in front of the two-story house where the babysitter witnessed something she can only mumble incoherently about.

This neighborhood rarely gets an emergency visit of any kind. So when the sirens screamed down their block, and skid into the Morrison's front yard, not even the pounding rain and a thunderous night could stop the neighbors from gathering under large umbrellas, dressed head to toe in bright yellow rain gear and huddled together buzzing to find out what has transpired on their normally tranquil street.

Every time a police officer or paramedic hurries from the house to their vehicle to grab something, one of them calls out, "Everything alright in there?" or "What the devil happened?" But the only answer they receive is the disturbed look on the faces of the first responders as they hurry back inside, leaving the onlookers more agitated and determined to know what was going on inside.

"Something awful must've happened if they can't even tell us," One elderly lady grumbles. "I don't think the Morrisons are even home," pipes up another neighbor. "Yeah," answers another, "Their silver SUV wasn't in the garage when I went up to look in."

"What'd you see?" Asked a middle-aged man who keeps wiping his fogged up glasses with his flannel sleeve. "Nothing. It was too dark, but I could tell it was empty. Then a cop ran me away before I could look in the living room windows."

"Maybe it was a home invasion" a tall teenager offers. He wears a black hoodie pulled tight over his head and matching black jogger pants. No umbrella. The rain pours down his handsome face but he doesn't seem to mind. His declaration sends a wave of angst through the crowd as they realize if it had been a home invasion their houses could be targeted next or even now while they are out here being nosey in the storm. So, like a teacher when she dismisses her class at the bell, they break apart without a word, heads down, shielding themselves from the pounding rain. They each slog back to their own

homes to make sure they hadn't been broken into, leaving only the tall teenager standing out; a lone wolf staring at the front of the house as if he could sense what was going on inside or could see right through the walls.

As he stands there fixed like a lamppost to the sidewalk an unmarked car with a blue flashing light smacked on top above the driver's door barrels towards him. The hard rain streaks across the on coming headlights. The teen's attention remains moored to the house, unaffected by the sudden skid as the barreling car wrenches to a stop and lodges between two of the parked cop cars.

A female police officer comes out the front door of the house, pops open an umbrella, and splashes down the steps heading towards the unmarked car. A woman, Detective Yates, in her early thirties, gets out of the late arriving vehicle. She wears a dark blue blouse and matching trousers. Professional attire, but not a uniform. Her light brownish blonde hair is pulled back in a hasty attempt to look presentable. But a swath of long strands hang loosely down on both sides framing a pretty almond shaped face with piercing brown eyes. The kind that when she's looking at you, you sense she's looking into you.

The Detective snatches a short, tightly wound umbrella out of her door skin pocket. She rips back the Velcro strap and presses the release button. It doesn't respond. She jerks it back and forth a couple of times but it doesn't appear to want to get wet this evening.

She shouts to the officer hurrying towards her. Those long strands of hair now soaked and clinging to her face like a spider web.

"Laura", she calls to the female officer, "Please stay with my little girl until my husband gets here. If you can just sit in the car for me."

The female officer reaches her and holds her umbrella above them both. She glances past Yates and fixes on the three-year old girl belted into her child seat. "Don't you worry," Laura assures her, "Lilly is safe with me."

On that statement, the tall lanky teenager pulls his attention off the house and over to the two ladies. They don't seem to be aware he is even there. Lightning streaks across the sky. His cold dark eyes reflect the streak. A chilling smile creeps across his lips. He mouths in a hushed tone, "Lilly", and takes a long deep inhale through his flared nostrils like he can smell the little girl from there. His eyes turn that same reddish orange glow the babysitter saw. Then in a split second the rain seems to wash him down and he reshapes into a slippery brownish salamander with glassy black eyes.

"What was that?" Detective Yates cranes her neck to see around Officer Laura where the teenager just stood.

Laura looks that way. "What was what?"

"I don't know," she shrugs. "I thought I saw a flash of orange light or something. Must be the lightning reflecting off the cars."

The salamander scurries off the sidewalk, disappears into the grass and head towards them. Yates goes into the car and snags a towel off her passenger seat. She comes back out mopping her face with it.

"Here, take this umbrella, Detective." Laura grabs the faulty umbrella from her, and hands her the open one they are standing under. They pause, protected from the pelting rain under the wide brim. The heavy drops slap the tight black cloth and almost drown out their voices. It's like a shower of pebbles cascading over them.

Detective Yates gives an apprehensive glimpse towards the house. "How is it?" Laura averts her eyes, shakes her head. "Same scene. Different house." A pained look crosses Yate's face. She swallows hard and looks over at her fast asleep daughter. "I don't know if I can do this anymore."

Laura places her hand on the Detective's shoulder. Yates looks back at her, tears welling up in her eyes.

"It's horrible," Laura laments, "but we have to find out what's going on with all these precious babies."

Laura looks to the sleeping girl. "Lilly and my little Davey need us to figure it out and stop it now."

Yates gives a nod, pads her face with the towel, and tosses it back onto the passenger seat. She takes a determined breath, focuses on the house in front of her, steels her nerves, even though playing out in her mind are the many times she's walked in on the very same grim scene the past several months in every kind of house and neighborhood across this city. Rich, poor, middle class, it didn't make a difference. And after every scene she went to, she always prayed she would never have to enter another like it again. But here she is. Another house. Another family. Another child. Sapped somehow of its life force.

No explanation. No reason.

They were all peacefully asleep, like her Lilly is right now, then they are found shriveled up, skin grey, and eyes hollowed like a corpse that's been in a box in the ground for years. No answers from the Coroner who performs the autopsies. No clues at the scenes. Just healthy, happy babies that go to sleep, only to never wake up, completely drained of their youthful essence, shriveled, and collapsed on their own skeletons.

"I would say it was an extreme form of SIDS", began the elderly Coroner, Doctor Dorsey, tossing a manila folder down on his desk. He just completed an autopsy of the latest victim and began to brief Detective Yates and Officer Laura in his office. Over the past several months he had already examined over a dozen little bodies, and at that juncture tried to reach for an explanation wrought from the forty plus years of dissecting dead people.

He plopped down in his rolling maroon leather chair, more frustrated than tired, and heaved a heavy sigh. "But that doesn't even account for the drawing up of the bones, or the skin losing all moisture, the eyes shriveling in their sockets. It's as if their body has aged a hundred years in seconds."

He let his head drop, exasperated, and defeated. "Tell the truth" he paused, then looked up, his eyes going from Yates to Laura and back again, and in a hushed tone and a sullenness in his voice Yates



hadn't remembered ever hearing in the time she'd known him, "nothing of this makes sense. At least not in this world."

"A nightmare" Yates mumbles before heading into the Morrison's house to get up to speed with her next unsolved mystery.

Out from under the umbrella, the rain chases Laura into the car. She snatches the door shut. The hard rain beats against the vehicle so loud it reminds her of hiking in the mountains of Georgia and standing in a cave behind a waterfall. So violent, yet strangely peaceful. Sitting in there, she can't even hear herself breathe, but she sees the windows fog up to the point where the lights in the house are a shimmering distortion casting their soft glow out into the yard. She glances back at Lilly and has to shake off the terrifying thought of, God forbid, it happening to her or her own two-year old son. Laura grabs the towel off the passenger seat. She doesn't notice the brown salamander she just uncovered staring up at her with those little black bubbles for eyes. She wipes herself off as if trying to wipe away that image from inside the Morrison's house and tosses the towel back onto the seat. An empty seat. The salamander is gone.

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The babysitter was the first break out of all the cases they'd had. At least from a witness standpoint. The other cases never had anybody see anything. But Penelope was so traumatized by what she saw, Detective Yates wasn't even sure the story she relayed was even real. In fact, it was so out there that the rest of the officers could only steal glances back and forth and shake their heads wondering if the poor girl had really seen anything, or if she just lost her mind.

In questioning her, they gathered she was an A student who planned to use her babysitting money to help with college. But at this point, watching the girl fall apart relaying what she saw, the Detective wasn't even sure she was going to finish her senior year. But her eyewitness account was the only thing they had to go on. So, Yates listened and wrote down everything. In fact, this was the easy part of the

case. Having to inform the parents was the part she absolutely dreaded, something she knew would be her worst nightmare if the shoe was on the other foot.

Once back in the station and after rereading the babysitter's statement several times it started to seem just as plausible as anything any of them had come up with. Which was exactly nothing. Yates lets the sitter's report slide out of her hand onto her desk and stares off into space just trying to wrap her brain around a sinister being sucking the life out of babies via a silver thread, then turning into the baby it just killed, and then a cat like creature and disappearing into nothingness.

And let's not forget those glowing reddish orange eyes the little boy and cat had.

*This is going to go over well with the news media.*

They'd have her locked up in a mental ward for just considering it.

"Okay, so what are you thinking?" Laura breaks Yates' train of thought.

She stands before her with two cups of coffee and a small white bag. Whenever they find it hard to shake the images of these cases, they try to normalize themselves with a shot of Joe and some kind of treat. She hands a cup to Yates and pulls out a long sugary twisted donut.

"Oh, that's a lot of sugar," Yates looks apprehensively. "Doctors orders," Laura insists.

Yates takes it. "Thanks. I think I may need a dozen of these, actually." She forces a smile.

"I wish it was that easy to get over," Laura responds.

As Yates is about to bite into the white powdery treat, the phone on her desk rings. She picks it up not really ready for the first round of media onslaught. "Hello. Detective Yates speaking."

The voice that comes through the phone isn't a reporter which gives her a small sense of relief.

However, the fact that it is the Coroner's voice and he sounds a bit excited and a bit unnerved puts the knot back in her stomach.

It wasn't his usual calm professional tone she has gotten used to over the five years they've worked together, where nothing seems to surprise or affect him. "Strangely detached," she had described him to Officer Laura after he briefed them on the third baby that had been killed.

"Maybe after all his years that's how he has learned to cope and keep functioning," Laura reasoned. "I wish I could learn that."

"Part of me does too," Yates agreed, "But at the price of how much humanity?"

Neither one could answer that.

"Detective", he starts. "Can you come by? I need to show you something. Something I discovered on all the bodies." He pauses, then his voice gets low as if not wanting to be overheard. "I'm not sure it will lead to anything, but I think it must mean something. I'll be up the rest of the night." He abruptly hangs up.

"Come." Yates jumps up and waves to Laura. "Coffees and donuts to go, please." Laura snatches her cup and the white bag and follows Yates out.

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"Have you ever heard of the Nazca Lines?" Doctor Dorsey stands in front of a long stainless-steel table.

He begins laying out pictures of all the dead babies he took from his reports.

Laura turns away. "I'm not really sure I can stomach this tonight."

"Please. Indulge me." The Coroner pleads.

"What do you mean Nazca Lines?" Yates asks him. She picks up a few of the pictures. Each one is like looking at one of her failures. *Not sure I can stomach this tonight, either.* She drops them on the table, not wanting to pour over the horrifying photos any more than she had to.

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The Morrison's neighborhood playground buzzes with children. Except for the damp white sand in the play area the previous night's thunderstorm has been forgotten. The small park has monkey bars,

seesaws, and swings at one end, and on the other end, a fifteen-foot high plastic climbing house with ramps, and slides, and large pieced together plastic boxes of bright greens, reds, yellows and oranges. And bubble windows so the kids can look out and the parents can see in. It's basically a large erector set built just for kids. Everything a child's imagination needs to play for hours and hours.

Off the play area several benches line the periphery. Under one grand oak tree a couple of benches have been placed side by side to provide shade for the parents while they keep watch over their children.

Cynthia is one of those mothers who brings her child here every school day off before lunch and nap time while it's still cool enough to stand the humidity. She sits on one of the benches and chats with another mother while keeping an eye on her energetic three-year old girl, Clarice. Their conversation today centers on the best afternoon daycares in their area. Cynthia is considering getting a part time job but needs to find a place she can trust that is not so expensive it washes what she will make working.

Clarice is already in pre-school and that costs her enough.

She watches Clarice, "Reesey" she likes to call her, climb up one of the playhouse ladders, get to the first landing and wave at her through a big yellow plastic bubble of a window. Clarice's smile is infectious and when her little playmate catches up to her, a three-year old boy named Colton, whom she's been playing with for at least a year and a half, does the same thing she does; Looks down on their parents, smiles and waves. Because they are only children, and they attend the same pre-school together, they stick to each other like they are brother and sister. "Peanut butter and Jelly," Colton's mother, Pamela, has nicknamed them. "The inseparable dynamic duo," Cynthia laughs.

"Look at those two. You'd think they were on top of the world waving to us," Pamela smiles. Cynthia chuckles, "Or waving to us from the moon."

They go back to their conversation when Clarice and Colton continue their climb up the next ladder that leads them to a large plastic box and platform where there are three slides that descend back down to the sand box. One slide has two curves to it that goes one way then the other. That one is Clarice's

favorite. She likes the feeling of sliding and turning. Another slide goes straight down. That is Colton's favorite because he says it makes him "fly super dooper fast like Ironman." And the third slide has two humps in it. Neither one of them like that because they do not like how it makes their stomach jump.

"That slide is more for older kids," Cynthia answered her precocious daughter when she asked one day why they would waste a slide spot for one that she doesn't like. "That's okay," the little girl shrugs, "I like my curvey swervy one." Clarice smiled at her little angel wishing she never had to grow up with her bright pink plastic bows fixed to the end of two twisted black ponytails that bounce around her never still while she's awake head, and her gap tooth smile with her little chicklet teeth. "I know you do."

Cynthia scooped her sweet baby girl up and nuzzled her neck sending Clarice into a laughing ticklish tizzy. Clarice's laugh was the kind that made everyone laugh when they heard it. One mother commented, laughing, "Cynthia, you should bottle her laugh and sell it. We'd have one happy world." To which Cynthia just nodded proudly knowing that was the truth.

Cynthia would do anything for her little pudding pie, except let her have a pet, which is why she was surprised when Clarice popped in front of her, Colton by her side, carrying the cutest little black kitten with bright green emeralds for eyes.

"Can I keep her, momma?" Clarice was cuddling the soft ball of fur, and Colton was scratching it behind the ear. Both looking at Cynthia as if life and death depended on it. Pamela waited to see how Cynthia was going to handle this "Not in any mother's handbook moment."

"Awww, Reeseey," Cynthia searching for what to say. "You know we are both allergic to cats."

Clarice's face drops like a boulder in water. Her arms sling down as the kitten dangles from her hands at her waist. Colton's eyes get saucer like. He seizes the opportunity to snatch the kitten for himself and bribe his mother with his big blues.

"Put that kitten down, Colton. Its mommy is going to be looking for it." Pamela was a little more direct.

"You two want to take him away from his mommy and break her heart?"

Clarice and Colton look at one another, tears welling in up in their eyes, more because they can't have the kitty than breaking its mommy's heart. They half sulkingly shake their head "No".

"Then go put it over by the tree so it can find its way back to its mommy." Cynthia instructs.

The two walk away, shoulders slumped, heads drooped.

"And don't pick up any more strays." Pamela reinforces her conviction. Cynthia and Pamela share a pouty smile, sad they had to say "no" but happy they were strong enough to mean it.

Colton puts the kitten down by the trunk of the tree, in between a couple large roots that spread out from it across the ground. The roots almost hide the tiny critter.

"Let's go find the mommy so it won't be lost." Clarice grabs Colton's hand and off they run on their next adventure. The kitten stares after them. Its eyes turn from that beautiful green, emerald color to a bright burning orange. Then its black body goes inky, watery like, and it dissolves into a small brown spider about the size of a quarter.

The spider crawls over a tree root, across the white sand and makes its way up and into Cynthia's large bag placed under the bench next to her. It is a carry all bag she stuffs with all of Clarice's things like a coloring book and crayons, a bottle of water, a bag of chips, a change of clothes, especially underwear, in case of an emergency. A small first aid kit, and a few other things that when they are out and about and something should come up, or happen, they will pretty much be covered. "Don't forget my Mergency Bag, momma," Clarice always reminds them before they walk out of the house.

Now it includes the brownish spider, unnoticed by either of the two mothers.

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The Coroner turns on a slide projector that sits on a pushcart in the middle of one of his small offices in the morgue. The bright white light gleams against a bare tan wall. He walks over and shuts off the lights so Detective Yates and Officer Laura can see what he is about to show them better.

“Something kept bothering me about these bodies,” he starts. The Doctor pushes a button on the remote control that’s wired into the projector. It makes a clicking sound and the first image is projected onto the wall.

It is a picture of one of the dead babies taken from the bottom side of the feet. They actually look more normal than the rest of the body, not as shriveled. Doctor Dorsey switches to a second picture. Again, taken from the bottom of the feet.

“Not sure I know what I’m supposed to be looking for,” Yates pipes up becoming a little impatient.

“I examined these bodies thoroughly and each one, as you two are aware, died the same way,” he continues.

“You mean you discovered the cause of death?” Laura asks hopeful.

“No. Sorry. By the same way, I mean, each baby died shriveled up on itself. I am not referring to cause but to result,” he continues.

“Okay. But what does this have to do with Nazca Lines?” Yates asks.

The Coroner walks over to the projected image. Momentarily his white lab coat reflects the picture. He moves out of the way and points to the right big toe of the infant. Yates and Laura move closer trying to see what exactly he is pointing to.

“Looks like a freckle or a mole,” Laura offers.

“A birthmark?” Yates blurts.

“I think none of those things,” he counters, and presses the button on the remote to change the picture.

On the wall a closer shot of the baby’s big toe comes up. The mark gets clearer.

“What is it?” Yates asks.

Laura leans closer to the image. “Looks like some sort of tattoo,” she observes. “But it’s a bit fuzzy.”

“Yes, so, I had the image cleaned up and enlarged,” he responds.

The Coroner clicks to the next slide. They have to stand back to take it all in. The mark is clearly a drawing or an image of what looks to be a hummingbird.

"This is what that spot is?" Yates questions. "A tiny bird tattoo? Maybe it's just an anomaly."

"That's what I figured at first, so I checked the other fourteen babies," he informs them.

"And," Laura asks anxiously.

"And..." He clicks to the next slide. This time it is a blow up of a strange looking monkey drawing.

"Monkey," Laura says.

He clicks to the next one. It looks like a weird drawing of either a cat or a dog.

"Cat?" Suggests Yates.

"They say it's a dog," responds the Doctor.

"They who? Have you shown this to anyone else?" Yates sounds a bit miffed.

"No, no, no," Dorsey pushes his glasses back up his nose. "Archaeologists liken it or rather this image to a dog. Although, I can see it being a cat."

"Okay. Let's reel this in and start from a page we can all be on," Yates says, a bit exasperated trying to connect the dots.

"My apologies, Detective. It's just that it's so out in left field," he lets out a nervous chuckle, not sure he is even following all this to its logical conclusion. He continues, "I almost don't know how to present it. Let me start from the beginning and then I will continue with the slide show."

He switches on the lights and gestures back to the stainless-steel table where they first started, where the baby pictures he laid out are. They follow his lead and each take a stool around the table.

He picks up several of the pictures. "For nights something kept going through the back of mind but I could not place my finger on it. I studied the picture of these victims over and over until I finally noticed, what you called an anomaly." He glances at Yates.

Yates nods, "Go on. I'm following." She looks at Laura who nods her head for him to keep going.



He does. "On the large right toe of every baby is a spot. What at first I thought was just a freckle, like you, Officer Laura, or a birthmark, Detective. But...", he pauses and Laura cuts in, "But what are the chances that all fifteen babies are going to have a birthmark or freckle on their big right toe."

"Exactly", he stabs a long bony pointer finger at her. "So, I had them blown up and each one is an image or drawing of what you saw up there. In fact, there are other different images, more than just the couple I showed you."

"How many? I mean, there's a different image on each baby's toe?" Laura asks, hardly believing what she is hearing.

"Oh yes. There are fifteen babies and fifteen images. Each one is different, yet each one looks like a small freckle at the end of the toe."

"And that's where the Nazca Lines come in," Yates finally understands.

The Coroner nods to her. "These aren't just random images, they are copies of the geoglyphs in the deserts of Peru. The Nazca lines."

"I'm not familiar with Nazca Lines," Laura starts. "What are they? What do they mean?" She begins typing on her cellphone and images of the Peruvian Nazca Lines come up. "Wait a minute. That's them? These are those? Those – those images on their toes are these? How the hell?"

Her voice drifts into the now quiet room and hangs for a few moments while they stare at each other and ponder what is actually being considered.

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Once inside the house, Clarice makes a beeline for the refrigerator. She knows right after the park she can have one of her favorite treats. She slings open the fridge and takes out a Yumgurt. Her drinkable yogurt. She especially loves the peach flavor. She also knows it's "Tomato Soup Wednesday" and that's one of her favorite soups. She gets to dip toast in it, soak up the delicious tomato flavor, and eat it all up.

Cynthia kicks off her shoes and heads upstairs to put Clarice's everything bag back in her room. "Don't get too wound up," Cynthia calls down, "You're going to take your nap after lunch."

"I know, Mommy," she groans and slurps down her drink. She lets out a big exhale of approval. "Delish," she says, imitating her mother when she eats something she loves. Then a scowl crosses her face, "Naps are for babies."

Her mom comes in just in time to hear it.

"Naps are for adults, too." Cynthia takes out the tomato soup she made the night before and pours it in two bowls and sticks them in the microwave. She sets the timer for two minutes and presses "Start".

"It's just good to recharge your batteries after going and going since you got up. When you nap, mommy naps."

Cynthia takes a couple slices of bread out of a loaf and puts them in the toaster sliding down the lever.

She goes over and picks Clarice up in her arms. She studies her child's beautiful face and soaks up her big dark brown eyes and recalls the first day she looked into them. It was a hard, long birth, over twenty-eight hours. Cynthia was wrecked, but when they brought her eight-pound three-ounce bundle of sweetness to her and she gazed into those beautiful brown pools, love pushed all that pain and fatigue away. And it's only grown from there.

"Then we get up and go again until nighttime," she nudges Clarice's nose with her finger, "and we have the energy to do it."

Clarice looks at her with all sincerity, "Well, maybe you can nap and I can relax watching TV."

Cynthia laughs. "Nice try, Reeseey. Not going to happen."

The microwave buzzer goes off. Cynthia gives her little girl a big hug and plops her down on the cushioned bench at the breakfast nook. She heads over and takes out the steaming hot bowls of soup and runs them over to the table.

The toaster pops. She snags the slices out and puts them on a small plate, sets them on the table, and takes a seat herself. “But what if I’m not tired?” Clarice takes a stab at bargaining one more time.

“Eat,” Cynthia points to the bowl. That tells Clarice the subject is closed.

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“How many Nazca Lines are there?”

Yates looks at the elderly Coroner for an answer. His grey bushy eyebrows look as if they are being held up by gold wire rim glasses. His kind gentle grey eyes always reminded her of her grandfather’s. It is those eyes and strong but soft demeanor that gave her confidence to trust this man with every detail of her investigations, and sometimes even personal problems. He was a great listener as well as being a thorough, caring, professional. But like her and Laura, he was taking this case personal. And she was grateful for that. Of course, he had a keen sense for detail, but also a knack for seeing things where others might have missed.

He raises one of those bushy grey eyebrows and exclaims, “At least a thousand.”

“A thousand?” Laura yipes. “Holy crap. Those poor ancient people must’ve spent their whole lives drawing, or carving, or...however they did it...making those lines. And for what? I mean, it looks like you can only see them from space.”

Dorsey looks over at Yates. “Like I said over the phone, I don’t know if it will lead to anything, but it’s got to mean something.” Now his voice is the tail attached to the kite of heavy silence hovering in the room.

Yates stands up. “Show us the rest of the images.”

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Cynthia finishes her bowl of soup and looks over at Clarice. She is slumped over with a partially eaten piece of toast in her hand, sound asleep.

“Not tired, huh?” Cynthia chuckles to herself, scoops up her sweet baby and heads upstairs. She lays Clarice in her Dora the Explorer bed and covers her with the matching blanket and sheet. She kisses her softly on the forehead. “Love you, Reeseey Peesey,” she whispers, and goes to lie down herself.

On the ceiling above Clarice, if she were to open her eyes, would probably let out a blood curdling scream. As it is, fast asleep, she doesn’t see the brown spider descending towards her on an invisible thread. It drifts down with almost no swaying until it reaches about six inches above her blanket, right where her belly rests underneath. The spider’s legs begin to twitch as if pulling something up. Out from the blanket sprouts a thin silver shoot, like a seedling pushing through the soil out of the seed and stretching towards the sun. The silver thread reaches the spider and it continues to move its legs gathering it in. As it gathers it faster and faster, little Clarice begins to lose her color as if she is fading away. Her thick black shiny hair loses its luster and shrivels up like seaweed being dried in the sun. Her skin begins to shrink against her body, her face sucks in, wrapping itself tightly around her skull. Her big beautiful eyes shrink up to the size of raisins. In barely a minute she is unrecognizable. Her frame collapses in on itself as she goes from being a healthy thirty-five pound little girl, to a frail greyish stick figure scrunched up like an embryo in a womb.

The spider extracts the last of the silver chord, rises back up to the ceiling, and crawls across to the bedroom window where it becomes a black watery looking substance that pours down on to the floor transforming into a dark shadowy fog. It hangs near Clarice’s body for a moment, almost as if enjoying its latest kill, then seeps out the edges of the window like black smoke from a fire. It regathers into a small jet-black hummingbird and hovers for a long moment in front of the glass then in a blink zips off into the bright blue sky.

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“Shit, shit, shit,” Yates pounds her steering wheel. Her siren screams as she screeches around the corner and down the street towards the address she just got another call about. “Please not another dead

baby,” she pleads. “Not like the others.” She pulls into the swale in front of the house, pauses to gather herself. She glances around the yard. This time she beat everyone.

She takes a deep breath, looks in the mirror and wipes the wetness from under her eyes. “Hold it together.”

She jerks open her door and heads up the walkway. The front door slings open and a black woman with a crazed tearful face comes running out screaming, “My baby. My baby. She’s gone. She’s gone.”

For a hopeful moment, Yates thinks she means missing. “When did she disappear?” she asks when she gets up to the woman. “No. I mean she’s dead. My Reese is dead.”

It’s Cynthia. She collapses in Yates’ arms unable to stand any longer.

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Clarice’s body gets rushed into the Coroner’s lab. Yates and Officer Laura right next to it. Doctor Dorsey already has his table prepared. One of the rescue drivers lifts the lifeless body still wrapped in her Dora the Explorer sheet off the gurney and onto the shiny table. Dorsey signs their papers along with Yates and Laura. They nod, grim faced, and quickly exit, rolling the gurney out with them.

Dorsey moves to the body, unwraps the sheet from her, and lets out a heavy sigh. He shakes his head, “How many more?” he mumbles under his breath.

“We’re still no closer than when we got the first one,” Yates laments.

“I take it no witnesses,” he replies.

Yates and Laura shake their heads.

“She fell asleep eating her lunch,” Yates begins. “The mother carried her upstairs, put her in her bed and went and laid down herself. She got back up a half hour later, went in and....” Her voice cracks. Yates can’t hold it in any longer. She wails, tears stream down her face. “Oh, God.” She bends over leaning on her knees. She can barely stand.

Laura hurries to her and wraps her arms around her. Yates buries her head on her shoulder and weeps.

“How are we ever going to stop this? How can we stop a ghost?”

Dorsey comes over to them, a towel in his hand. He places his hand on her back. “Sorry,” Yates mumbles.

“Nothing to be sorry about.” He hands her the towel. “You have a good cry.” He nods to a teary-eyed Laura to take Yates into his office where she can lie down on a couch.

“Give me a few minutes,” he says with a hoarse voice, “I’ll come back and get you.”

Laura escorts Yates out. The Doctor goes back to the once adorable and lively Clarice and stares at the emaciated figure drawn up before him. He slips off his glasses and weeps.

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The rain is coming down like Noah is somewhere near in his Ark. Normally, this time of year, it rains in the afternoon, so this was an unusually early shower on a Thursday morning . The cars to drop off the pre-schoolers stretched around the block with windshield wipers slapping back and forth. Other than the storm, this is the same scene every weekday. The parents pull up and the school has volunteer guards to walk each child to their classrooms.

Pamela and Colton are the fifth car back. “Don’t forget your Packpack,” she reminds him. “Yes, mommy,” he nods. Colton always called his backpack a “Packpack”. She thought it was so cute instead of correcting him, she started calling it a packpack as well.

“And remember to share those cookies I made you with Clarice,” she glances back at him in the mirror. They still hadn’t heard about Clarice.

He nods his head “yes”. He was more interested in watching the raindrops smack the window on his side and run down the glass making little crisscross streaks until he noticed a little black girl with pink plastic bows clipped to her ponytails go by on the sidewalk next to the driveway.

“Reeseey,” he calls, and stabs the window with his little pointer finger.

Pamela lifts up off the seat to watch Clarice walk by to go into the school. She has no raincoat on and no umbrella to walk under and she doesn't seem to be affected by the pouring rain at all. And she's still in the same outfit she wore at the park the day before.

*That's weird.*

Pamela swivels her head back around to the line of cars behind her to see if she can see Cynthia's car. It's not like her to let Clarice out before she gets to the front. The view is too distorted because of the rain to see clearly. She checks her rearview mirror and side mirrors but still no good. She looks back towards the front gate and just catches Clarice stroll past the guards and into the school yard. They don't even notice her.

She takes her cellphone out and brings up Cynthia's number. She calls her but the answer machine picks right up as if the phone has been turned off. She hangs up and tries again. Same thing. It doesn't ring but goes right to Cynthia's happy voice apologizing for not being able to answer the phone, then Clarice's squeaky cute voice cuts in and says, "But leave us a message and I'll make sure my mommy calls you right back, unless she's making me an ice cream cone, then you're going to have to wait." Clarice's infectious giggle follows right before the beep to leave a message. That always put a smile on Pamela's face, but not today. Not this morning. Deep inside, Pamela just knows something isn't right. She hangs up without leaving a message.

A car honks from behind her. She looks up from the phone and realizes she has to pull up to get to the guard. It's Colton's turn to get out. But instead of just pulling up she swings past the front gate and parks along the sidewalk on the other side. She grabs her umbrella, opens her door, pops it and goes around to get Colton out. "C'mon, mommy's going to walk you in." She unstraps the young tyke from his seat and lifts him out. She takes his hand and they walk under the umbrella towards the gate.

“Good morning, Miss Pamela,” calls out one of the teenage student volunteers. He is dressed in yellow rain gear and carrying a large green and white umbrella. The school colors. The name of the school, “Pinetree Academy”, is emblazoned across it.

“Did you notice Clarice walk past you by herself, Leonard?” she asks him. He glances around looking for her. “Never mind, she already went in,” Pamela says a bit annoyed and moves past him hurrying towards Colton’s classroom and trying to catch up to Clarice if she can.

They swiftly maneuver past the back and forth of kids going in and volunteers coming back out. All of them trying to stay as dry as they can. At one point she steps off the sidewalk to get around a stuck herd of people landing both her and Colton smack dab in the middle of a puddle. “Mommy,” Colton cries out. She quickly snatches him up and out of it as she sloshes her way back on to the sidewalk. She sets Colton down to keep walking beside her. He starts to cry.

“What’s wrong?” she turns to him but continues to drag him towards his classroom. “Shoes wet!” he complains. “Oh, honey. You can take them off when you get inside,” she promises him.

Around the corner is his classroom building with all kinds of fun animal figures painted on the outside, and silhouettes of little children holding hands with their arms raised like they are playing. Other parents are there dropping off their kids and the back and forth of all sizes and colors of umbrellas looks like an ant parade busily foraging to and fro from their hole. Everything is so wet and chaotic no one notices the little black girl with the pink clip bows wash down into a sooty fog and turn into a small jet-black hummingbird. It flits up and over a parent’s oversized blue and clear plastic umbrella and zips through the door of the classroom.

Pamela cuts around the corner and scans the human beehive ahead. She heads straight for it. No sign of Clarice. The rain doesn’t seem to care how long they have to wait. It’s not letting up. After what seemed to be an annoyingly long five minutes it is finally her turn to see Colton in.



“Good morning, Missus Sotter,” Pamela grits a smile to one of the pre-kindergarten teachers. She points down at Colton’s feet. “We stepped in a big puddle and Colton needs to get out of his wet shoes and socks.” Missus Sotter looks down at Colton with a commiserating smile, “Of course. Welcome to the world of sopping wet feet.”

She gestures towards a corner just inside the room where all the kids are removing their shoes and socks and piling them along the wall. “Just lay your wet socks across your shoes, Colton, so they can dry out.” She looks back at Pamela, “At least the best they can.” She chuckles.

Pamela bends down, “Go take your shoes off, honey, over there like the other kids.” She gives him a peck on the forehead, “Mommy loves you.” Colton doesn’t waste any time trudging over there anxious to shed his squishy shoes and socks.

Pamela stands back up and looks around the room. “Excuse me, Missus Sotter,” Pamela starts as she continues searching, “Did you see Clarice come in?”

“Clarice? Clarice Stanford?” A pained look contorts Missus Sotter’s face.

“Yes. What’s wrong?” Pamela inquires.

Missus Sotter pulls her close, looks around them, and whispers in a low voice. “You haven’t heard?”

“No. Heard what?”

Missus Sotter’s eyes well up and her lip quivers. She cups her hands over Pamela’s hands and speaks with a low rasp. “Let’s not talk here.”

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Doctor Dorsey bursts into his office holding up a picture he blew up in his dark room. “She has one. Right on top of her right big toe. A spider.” An image of the Nazca Line Spider is clearly visible on Clarice’s toe.

Yates and Laura spent the whole night there and it’s early Thursday morning.

Yates, lying down on the couch, takes the wet folded towel off her forehead and sits up. Laura sits behind the Coroner's desk looking at his computer monitor and tapping away at the keyboard. She stands up. "Sorry, I couldn't sleep so I thought I'd do some research."

He waves her to sit back down. "Of course, no problem."

He turns his attention to Yates and hands her the picture. "How are you feeling my dear?"

She nods, forces a smile, and studies the tattoo on the little girl's toe. "So, she has a Nazca Line image also." She shakes her head. "I see the dots, but I just can't connect them."

"Well, lets check out our dots," Laura says as she jumps up and goes over to the Coroner's printer. She gives each of them a copy of what she's been working on. And keeps one for herself. The Coroner takes a seat next to Yates. Laura sits on the other side of Yates. The Doctor adjusts his glasses to see better. "Number One Dot," Laura starts. "The Babysitter really offered us our best lead. First, she mentioned she saw a 'silver thread of life being pulled out of the baby'. I looked up the phrase 'silver thread of life' and a ton of things came up right away, but all basically pointed to there being a silver cord that links our physical body with our spiritual body. It's even mentioned in the Bible."

Laura points to the first paragraph on her paper. "Ecclesiasties Chapter twelve, verse six. And it's only found oddly enough in this one place in the Bible. King Solomon, considered the wisest King who ever lived wrote this Book, and he mentions a silver cord in this verse when he talks about the death of a man. 'Remember your Creator before the silver cord is loosed, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the well. Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.' "

Yates rereads the verse to herself. "So, the babysitter actually saw that silver cord being pulled out of the baby. It's life or connection to this world." Yates shakes her head. "This isn't making me feel any better."

"I know, but we can connect a dot," Laura encourages. "What the babysitter saw is so well known, a quick internet search brings up pages and pages of things to read."

"Okay," Yates tries to make sense of it. "So, let's say she didn't hallucinate and everything she reported is true. She saw some decrepit old man suck out this silver cord of life and before her eyes transform into a youthful guy, then it morphed into the baby it just killed, and then it became like black water and formed into a cat with orange glowing eyes that stared at her, and then just evaporated into thin air." She stops. No one says a word. Almost too much to digest they turn their attention back to Laura's paper.

"Number Two Dot," Laura continues. "Every child has a Nazca Line image on their right toe. All different ones."

She stops to read what she wrote. "Now archaeologists say those lines are at least two thousand years old, but they really don't know much else about them, except speculation. Some think they are earth markers for extra-terrestrial beings who visit here. Some think they are for spiritual ritual purposes. But nobody knows for sure."

"But I see you have a theory," the elder Coroner says as he reads her paper. "You believe it could be that these ancient people worshipped certain god's and either created those geoglyphs to honor them or rather call to them, or that giants created the glyphs being that some of them are over twelve hundred feet long," he pauses. "Giants?"

Laura jumps up, "I know, I know, but stay with me here." Laura sits on the edge of his desk. "Dot Three. According again to the Bible the daughters of Eve and the fallen angels mated and their offspring produced giants on the earth." She looks at them. "Of course, you've heard of David and Goliath." They both nod. "In Sunday school," Yates admits.

"Well, like when David killed Goliath his spirit went out from him, and because he was a hybrid, his spirit was basically cursed to roam the earth, disembodied. And those spirits of the dead giants are what

became known as demons. And in many cultures man inevitably ends up worshipping them and giving themselves over to them.”

“Wait a minute,” Yates interrupts. “So, you’re saying a spirit, or rather demon is what we are up against?”

Laura looks down at her paper. “Dot Four. According to Genesis in the Garden of Eden, Satan entered a serpent to tempt Adam and Eve. These demons can enter or imitate an earthly body. They can take on what is called, ‘strange flesh’ in the form of snakes, frogs, lizards---you name it. And they have the spiritual knowledge to steal the life cord of babies because they roam the spirit realm.”

“They or it?” Dorsey asks.

“I say it,” Laura responds. “Those Nazca Lines, I believe, are the different ‘strange flesh’ that this one particular demon changes into. And perhaps those people in Peru made those lines to ward it off to protect their children.”

“You think?” Yates asks.

“Who knows,” she shrugs, “I’m just speculating here in the time it took me to do a cursory internet search.”

“I hear you,” Yates sighs.

“And what is this demon called? Or what’s its name in their culture?” asks Dorsey.

Laura shakes her head. “I haven’t found that.”

Doctor Dorsey removes his glasses and rubs his forehead as if trying to massage this new esoteric information into his brain. “So this—this entity, or demon, for lack of a better word is what the babysitter saw and after it re-energized itself, so to speak, on the infant, it vanished into the unseen, or rather spirit realm.”

Laura nods her head several times as if she is swallowing something she didn’t chew very well.

“I don’t know,” the Coroner leans back against the couch and shakes his head.

“What? You don’t believe it’s possible?” Laura challenges him.

“No, no. I do believe it’s possible. I believe you probably hit the nail on the head.” Laura leans back surprised any of this seems possible herself.

“But what I can’t understand,” Dorsey pauses to gather his thought, “Is why all of a sudden it just shows up now after thousands of years?”

Yates looks down at Laura’s paper.

“According to Dot Five it may not have been thousands of years since this thing raised its ugly head.”

She looks back and forth at them. They each look down at the paper.

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The rain finally subsides and the sun breaks free of the thundercloud curtain. But it isn’t dry enough to let the pre-schoolers out to roam the playground, so they are instructed to play quietly inside until lunch and nap time. Now after the last of the sandwiches have been cleaned up, the children help open their cots. Each one gets one, and they each know which one is theirs. Of course, there’s always the few tykes that delay the inevitable and wander away from the nap area to try and go unnoticed in the toy area. But that never works as the two teachers, Missus Sotter and Miss Jenkins, round them up, and usher them back over like sheep to a sheepfold. Today, Colton was one of those wandering sheep.

Missus Sotter, having informed Colton’s mother earlier of the tragic death of Colton’s best friend Clarice, knew he didn’t know yet, but felt the need to handle him delicately because he was going to find out in time. She takes him by the hand and leads him over to his cot. “Now, Colton, help me set this up. It’s nap time.”

“No!” Colton refuses. He folds his arms across his chest in a defiant posture.

*It’s almost as if he senses something was wrong already.*

Colton and Clarice were like an inseparable pair of salt and pepper shakers. They did everything together. But today his best little friend never showed up. Although, the way his mother insisted her and Colton both saw Clarice walk into school was unnerving and strange.

Pamela had to be taken to the office to recover from the awful news. The nurse gave her something to calm down, but it still took an hour for her to feel well enough to leave. "I don't know how I will ever tell Colton," She kept sobbing. "We were just at the park with them yesterday. I just can't believe it." She'd get her feelings under control and within a few minutes it would hit her all over again, "Poor, Cynthia," and the crying would start all over again.

Missus Sotter sets Colton's cot up while he just stares at her. "Oh, boy. I guess I'll have to call mommy and tell her you refuse to take your nap," she threatens and pretends to walk away.

That did the trick. Colton quickly scrambles onto his cot and lies back. "I nap," he squeaks out.

"Good choice," the teacher turns back to him. "Mommy will be very happy."

Missus Sotter does a last check to make sure every child is in their right cot which are lined up on both walls like in an army barracks. She heads over to Miss Jenkins who stands at the door ready to flick off the lights. They both take one last look as they do every nap time, only this one causes them to share a sad moment. They both notice the empty spot where Clarice's cot always took up, like it's a black hole of cheerlessness threatening to suck in the rest of these peacefully napping innocent children.

Missus Sotter shakes her head. Neither woman needs to say anything. Their heavy hearts beat to the same distraught music. Miss Jenkins lets out a slight sigh that says it for both of them.

How quickly Clarice's vibrant short life ended. With no explanation that they know of. When they heard the news, neither teacher could grasp that they will never see little Clarice with her bouncy pig tails smiling and laughing with the other kids again. It didn't make sense then, and looking at that barren nap time spot, it doesn't make sense now. But as they stand their sharing this moment of grief for Clarice,

they both notice the two rows of the cutest little bare feet anyone could ever witness. Miss Jenkins looks over at Missus Sotter with tears dripping down her cheeks and allows a slight smile.

They will never forget Clarice and will have her classmates put up a memorial when it all comes out.

Knowing they will have lots of questions and running emotions the two teachers must be strong for their children, give them honest answers that may not help at all, but be a part of the healing process that will take place.

Missus Sotter and Miss Jenkins nod to one another in that heavy silence, both affirming, while they are hurting for the one they lost, they still have these lively little ones to tend to and that is what they will hold on to as a means to get through this most difficult time.

Miss Jenkins cuts off the fluorescent lights, and they quietly tip out the door. Behind them they leave eighteen lovely children to slip into dreamland and one tiny jet-black hummingbird they failed to notice perched atop one of the bookshelves patiently biding its time.

While all the kids lie resting on their cots falling fast asleep, a strange little spot on Colton's right toe glows a bright orange. Like a beacon calling to the hummingbird, it's eyes take on the same eerie orange glow that would put a jack-o-lantern to shame. It quickly flits across the room where it silently hovers just above Colton's tummy.

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The headline of the newspaper Laura found while doing her research on the Coroner's computer read, *"Kid Napper Steals All Twenty-Eight Of Red Rock's Children"*.

The newspaper was from the small Colorado mining town of Red Rock dated 1866. The article covered the tragedy of a scary being that could morph into any animal or person and steal the life out of the town's children while they napped. Hence, the townspeople began calling it the "Kid Napper". And after the devastating demise of all the children, the citizens, believing the land was cursed, disbanded, and became a ghost town.

“But that’s not the only thing,” Laura explains as they connect Dot Number Five.

“Yes, I see,” Yates closes her eyes for a moment trying to corral the multitude of thoughts running roughshod through her head. The fact that none of this seems real but is the only thing that makes sense makes it even more frustrating.

She opens her eyes and reads from the paper out loud. “The children were found shriveled up in their beds like old grey burlap sacks, after being put down for their naps.”

“It has to be the same entity, or demon,” Doctor Dorsey concludes.

“It has to be,” Laura says emphatically.

Yates lets the paper fall to her lap. She leans back and returns the folded towel to her forehead. “You’ve successfully connected the dots.”

“Yay, Google.” Laura forces a tight smile.

“But,” Yates stops to inhale an exhausted breath, “We still don’t know how to stop it or if we even can if it is this demon or entity, or whatever.”

Laura looks over at the Coroner hoping he might have a counter to what Yates just said. But his shoulders slump as if in agreement with the Detective.

“No,” Laura stands up, “There must be something we can do. Call a Priest or...”

Yates yanks off the towel and sits back up. “Or an exorcist?” She shakes her head, “How am I going to take that to the Lieutenant?”

The frustrated stench of defeat hangs in the air choking out any hope of stopping whatever they are up against. Of preventing another innocent life from being sucked away. The silence in that little office closes in on them crushing them like garbage in a trash compactor.

Then Detective Yates’ phone rings.

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No one could have imagined when they woke up that morning the ghastly sight that would greet Missus Sotter and Miss Jenkins when they came back into the classroom and turned on the lights to wake the sweet toddlers up.

No one could have ever known that on every right big toe would appear a small image matching a Nazca Line from some thousands of miles away and thousands of years in the past, but was a seal of death from the sinister entity who satiated its appetite for life flowing energy by feeding on young children's silver cords.

In their wildest imaginations not one person on earth could have foreseen the nightmarish event that now plasters the news stretching across the globe like wildfire. The story of eighteen children between the ages of two and four somehow murdered inexplicably in their pre-school classroom during their nap time, a period of only about thirty minutes.

It sent shockwaves around the world and the small colorful classroom at Pinetree Academy was at its epicenter.

It took dozens and dozens of first responders. From police officers to school counselors to teachers and school administrators to rescue workers to family members to even deal with such a tragic event.

Hardened EMT's were puking their guts out the scene was so horrifying and nauseating.

"How?" cried their parents. And "Why?" they screamed over and over collapsing from the stress of the tragedy.

Those were questions that couldn't be answered. There were no consoling words that could fill the void that was left in the wake of this unspeakable tragedy and Detective Yates and Officer Laura wandered through the hellish scene as if on cruise control, detached, having already witnessed this too many times, only the scale of this one sent them into the realm of a cold dark truth that no amount of police work is going to make this stop. They simply became automatons going through the motions, answering questions matter of factly, or not at all.

Occasionally, they would glance at one another knowing that all either one of them wanted to do was rush home to their children; to Lilly and Davey. To rip off their shoes and socks to see if they too had that horrible brownish spot tattooed to their right big toe, knowing if they did, there was nothing they could do to save them, unless they hugged them close, and held on to them, not letting them sleep until they finally got to the age where their silver cord of life did not attract the “Kid Napper”. And that was never going to happen. They both knew they just had to keep digging. To keep researching anything that could give them the answer to stopping this horrific entity.

“There must be some legend, some passed down story, some article or some old book that relates how to beat this thing,” Laura blurted as they raced to the school from the Coroner’s office. The only answer they had after that was oppressive silence. For now the best they could do is pray they somehow find the way and that no more children die before they do.

As the mummified bodies are being carefully wrapped in blankets and placed on gurneys, several at a time, a brownish salamander climbs up under one of the stretchers. An EMT rolls it out to a waiting Coroner’s vehicle. One of the many that is parked outside the school.

Before the gurney can get lifted into the truck, the salamander leaps onto the ground and makes it way over to Detective Yates’ car. It crawls up and clings to the underside of the vehicle where it patiently waits for Yates to drive home.

“Lilly,” a sinister voice hisses to no one.

The End