

THOMAS CREEPER AND THE GLOOMSBURY SECRET

J.R. Potter

with illustrations by the author



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For my niece and nephew, Mara and Liem,
and my godchildren, Max and Violet.

May your own adventures be greater than any story
and filled with love and joy that overthrows all monsters.

And to the memory of the late-great John Bellairs (1938-1991)
whose stories changed a ten-year-old boy's life forever.



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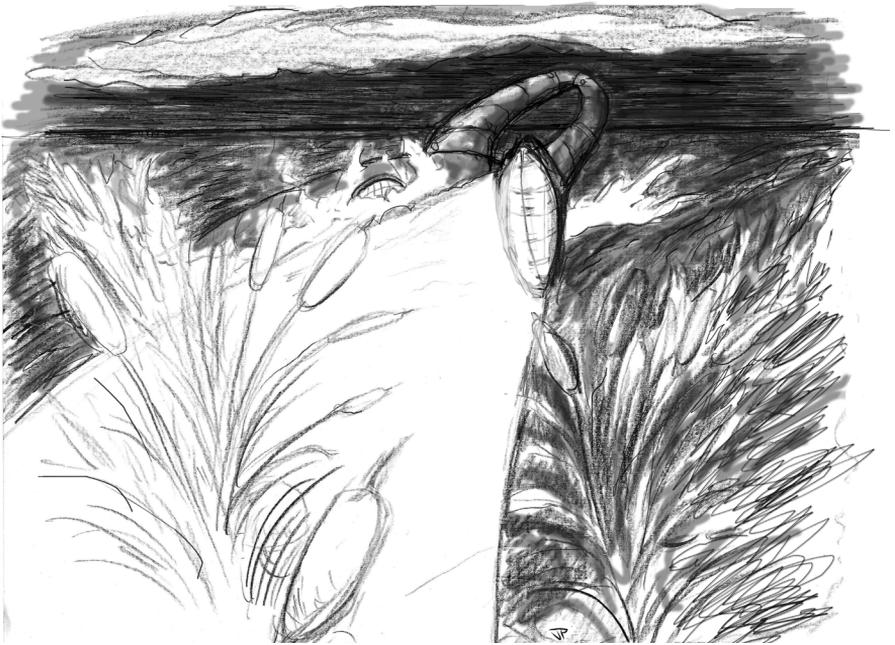
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“The ghost of ’lectricity howls in the bones of her face...”

— Bob Dylan, “Visions of Johanna”

“Don’t go looking under rocks.”

— Old Gloombsbury saying



PROLOGUE

The Conch Whistle Rises

Out in the rolling deep something stirred. Though no starlight or moonlight pierced the dense veil of clouds ringing Gloombsbury Bay, a faint glow—emerald green and pink—coming from signal lights attached to the large channel markers, broke through the swirling fog. Just beyond the light of one bobbing channel marker a copper periscope lifted from the water, kelp and seaweed clinging to its far-seeing eye.

The metal eye turned in the direction of the land: to the swaying cattail marshes, and beyond them, to the twinkling lights of Gloombsbury, Massachusetts, the cursed town. *Gloombsbury*. The town where the sun never shone but once or twice a year; where a stranglehold of clouds from a weather system dubbed “Mad Marge” by old sailors choked out warmth and sunlight, leaving the residents of the small seaside town pale and depleted of Vitamin D. Gloombsbury, of mold and tide pools where life rushed in...but didn’t always get out.

The periscope lowered. Up from the wine-dark sea the submersible now rose, its giant copper frame like a metallic whale breaching. From the viewing deck in the center of the submersible’s body a hatch flung open. Two figures crawled out—one tall and broad-shouldered, the other as short as he was wide. The smaller, squatter figure struck a waterproof match against the hatch door and for a brief instant his face flared out of the darkness, yellow-green and speckled with spots like a frog. The light of the match moved upward from the strange amphibious face to light a pipe in the hands of the taller figure next to him.

“Thank you, Mouth,” said the man, leaning down and taking a few swift draws on the pipe until the bowl was sufficiently smoking. The pipe bowl glowed a bright orange, illuminating the contours of the man’s face: square jaw, blond beard, and a deep red scar—in the shape of three claw marks—that ran the length of his cheek. For a few moments the two figures stood in silence while the submersible—their movable home and museum of all the wonders they had found exploring the world—rocked gently against the waves beneath them. Overhead a seagull broke the silence with its shrill cry. It flew out over the submersible, away from the shoreline. Even birds had an opinion about Gloomsbury it seemed. The man on the deck took a few more puffs from his pipe and reaching down, patted the shoulder of the creature named Mouth who had just spied a large June bug whizzing by.

Without a moment’s hesitation, the creature lashed out his long, whip-like tongue, consuming the buzzing insect and living up to the reputation of his name.

“Do you think the boy has any clue how terrible it’s going to get?” the man whispered, gesturing toward the shoreline with his pipe. “What those...*monsters* are going to do to him? There are far too many of them, Mouth. Dug into the whole rotting edifice like termites! And as for rumors of the Weapon...” The man grimaced and spat over the side of the ship. “History has not smiled favorably on those in his family who have tried to keep it safe.”

But Mouth didn’t speak. The things Mouth ate told him about places—it was his special gift. He could eat a shoe and tell you every street the shoe had gone down. The bug moving from his throat to his large-chambered stomach told him what the seagull fleeing the shoreline would have told him if only his tongue could stretch that high. But the message was clear:

Terrible things were afoot.

BOOK ONE:

The Phantom Car & The Girl on the Stairs





I

A DEATH & TWO SIGHTINGS, ONE NOT SO WELCOME

Thomas Creeper was late.

As the son of Gloombsbury's only mortician, time was always "of the essence," as the saying went.

A fresh corpse left too long would become as heavy as a giant, unbendable tree limb. The only difference is that the tree limb used to be your fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Hanson, or your neighbor whose face you saw only when they bent back the blinds to make sure you weren't tromping down their flower beds.

Thirteen-year-old Thomas Creeper knew Gloombsbury Township inside and out. He knew the roads like Shellburne, with its winding flood walls topped with oyster shells, where they used to turn shells into cement over a century ago; the marshes like Sarah's Lament, where the widow Sarah Belkerstein disappeared one night in her bathrobe, believing she'd heard the sound of her husband's Navy ship returning from the war. Thomas knew, too, about the dangerous sinkholes. (We will get to them soon enough. For now, just make a mental note: *sinkholes* = *very bad*. You could even imagine a giant skull next to the word if you'd like.)

But what was even worse was that because of Thomas's job as mortician's apprentice he knew the *people* of Gloombsbury Township inside and out. He knew their secret moles and birthmarks, their rare diseases, even what they last ate for dinner before they passed away. Believe me, there are not enough iPad games of crushing candy or catapulting birds to rid your brain of all that gooey and revolting stuff.

And if dealing with cadavers and bodily functions wasn't bad enough, of all days of the year when a legitimate "sun sighting" was predicted by all the local weather channels, Thomas Creeper was running late.

He hit the corner where the two main arteries of Gloombsbury crossed—Thayer Street and Weiland Avenue. Here the cement turned to wet and moldy cobblestones that caused cars to jostle and lurch into hydraulic spaz machines as they bumped their way toward the once-grand thoroughfare of Weiland Avenue and its splinter-fest of a boardwalk that led down to Town Beach. The rain, which fell nearly 363 days of the year, had let up a little... *a little*. But it was still a misting mess of a Wednesday in the middle of June. Only a few days earlier Thomas had graduated from Gloombsbury Middle School, home of the Fighting Squids. In addition to co-captaining the chess team, Thomas had ended his career as a Fighting Squid as a once-in-a-blue-moon standout for the school's track team.

He had hit his growth spurt earlier that year, sprouting a whole four inches in three months. Now he looked like a gangly, black-haired weed with a pale, pinched face like an albino squash. If his gangly legs were any gift at all, they helped him run away from the funeral home that was also his house. Try as he might, however, he could never outrun the horrible fact that he slept in a house with dead people.

Rounding the deserted bus terminal at Thayer and Weiland, he nearly stepped head-first into the path of a rust-colored sedan that blared its horn as it rocketed past, splashing gutter water all over Thomas's shirt and new glasses.

"You're gonna miss it!" a weaselly kid with his two front teeth missing shouted at him from the back window of the speeding car. Muttering and cursing to himself, Thomas wiped the lenses of his glasses with the side of his shirttail, blood roaring in his ears. He checked the time on his trusty Ken Darby Spy Watch complete with retractable wire (peppermint floss), an infrared message decoder (broken since

Christmas), and a hidden tray of cyanide pills (licorice for health reasons; c'mon, people!).

6:14 p.m...Two minutes!

The weasel-faced kid was right. He was going to miss it.

He flew down Weiland Avenue like a boy on fire. Jumping in between cars he leapt up onto the opposite sidewalk but landed flatfooted on the wet bricks, twisting his left ankle. *Was the whole world conspiring against him today?* He gnashed his teeth from the pain, blew a ragged breath through his nostrils, and fought his way forward, dragging his sprained foot like a crutch toward the smell of salt air and the screeching of the gulls up ahead.

It seemed as if the whole town had assembled to watch the sun sighting. It wasn't a mystery that the town of Gloomsbury was cursed. It was right there in the name.

Between the horrible weather system "Mad Marge" that encircled the town, to the vast network of underground sinkholes that could pull whole cars or baby carriages unexpectedly down to their doom, Gloomsbury was the least valued real estate in all of Massachusetts.

Even the neighboring town called Marvale had a better reputation. It had seceded from Gloomsbury in the 1920s like a broken hip, boasting to this day, "No Stinkin' Sinkholes." It wasn't the greatest town motto. But it was still better than Gloomsbury's:

"Live Here, Work Here, Die Here."

Thomas scanned the boardwalk all the way to the empty lifeguard tower on Town Beach. He could never remember anyone ever *actually* trying to swim in Gloomsbury Bay. There were unexpected riptides and discarded lobster pots that could ensnare your ankle, not to mention the occasional great white shark up from Provincetown that always spiced things up. At the door of the boarded-up lifeguard station a spray-painted sign hung for all to see.

"GO AHEAD. TRY IT," the sign read.

Thomas could see all the regular faces assembled for the sun sighting: there was Eugenia Sneed, of the wealthy Sneeds who lived up on the bluffs high above Gloomsbury on a great estate called Ivymount that no outsiders, not even telephone repairmen, had set foot on in years; there was Mr. Marsden, the town postman, his chin pushed all the way back, gazing up at the clouds, the fat ripples rippling down the back of his neck; there was Ms. Katz, the town librarian, with her two greyhounds that suffered from a rare skin disease that made them hairless and eternally itchy; and there was the parish staff of the local Catholic Church, St. Mary's by the Sea, ready to call the event "an act of divine Providence." Next to them Thomas could see the new family he hadn't met yet at church with the young daughter with the frizzy hair like electrified snakes. But no Jeni. *Where in the world was Jeni Myers?*

"Hey, gimpy! Over here!"

Thomas craned his neck, trying to see over the murmuring crowd. But as he swiveled around too fast on his stilt-like legs, he lost his balance...and ran smack into a mountain of chest and arms! Adjusting his glasses from where they had slipped on his nose, he blinked his eyes a few times expecting to see the worst: Gary Korvin, resident wedgie-wringer, earlobe-flicker, and infamous locker-smearer (the Korvins had a pond out in front of their house frequented each season by geese). Thomas relaxed...*a little*. It was just Mr. Contenescu, who ran the day-to-day operations at Sneed Waste Removal Services. People whispered around town that the old Romanian had once been a bare-knuckle boxing champion, but that he'd been banished from the sport for biting someone's throat. No substantial proof had yet to surface to confirm or deny the rumor.

"S-s-sorry," Thomas stammered in apology while Mr. Contenescu stared down at him from behind a thick, black moustache, wide as a skunk's tail but without the white stripe. The expression on the old Romanian's face was

indecipherable: indeed, a stone wall had more to say. After running his darting, black eyes over Thomas for a few more seconds—during which Thomas contemplated whether a swift uppercut would come out of nowhere, launching him backwards over the lifeguard stand into the treacherous waters of Gloombsbury Bay—Mr. Contenescu finally stepped aside. Thomas exhaled sweet relief. He blinked his eyes, and when he unblinked them there she was: standing in front of him, shaking her head at him with that same Jeni Myers smile that was always part smile, part jeer, depending on how you looked at it.

“Don’t worry,” said Jeni. “You didn’t miss it. Look!”

Above the white-capped sea the black sky began to lighten. The army of clouds patrolling Gloombsbury Bay momentarily gave up their stranglehold. The crowd let out a resounding “*AHHHHHHHHHH!*” and for the first time in seven months, twelve days, six hours, and thirty-two minutes the sun shone down upon Gloombsbury Township—on the rusting square and compass on the Masonic Lodge, on the mossy headstones and shrieking gargoyles in Gloombsbury Cemetery, on the salt-crusted cars, and most importantly, on Thomas Creeper himself.

The light shimmered like a golden veil tossed from some high astral plain where things never rot but bloom eternally. Mr. Marsden, whose sagging face tied off in a grimace at the bottom like the knot of a balloon, radiated a rare beam of joy; Ms. Katz, tears welling in her eyes, threw her arms around her hairless greyhounds until their powerful dander made her neck start to itch; even sour-faced Eugenia Sneed, who was just about to flick the cigarette butt from her long-stemmed cigarette holder into the inky surf, paused and looked agape at the miraculous vision of the sun shining down on the moldy, barnacled town she had given her life to without so much as a thank-you, only a few fading plaques in the Sneed name and a tax break or two to pay for a new wing of her mansion devoted solely to teacups.

Like an intermission in the horrible drama of his life, Thomas felt everything that was weighing him down suddenly lift—the dampness in his lungs, the funeral home where his father would be waiting for him with whatever new body had just arrived. But then the clouds sealed back overhead. The light faded. The crowd let out a mournful sigh. The news crew lowered their cameras. Eugenia flicked her cigarette into the surf and slid back through the open door of her pearly white Jaguar (which only she and she alone was allowed to park so close to the beach, having paid for the Great Sludge Removal of 1994). The Jaguar squealed away, spitting sand and clouds of choking exhaust. The world as Thomas Creeper knew it returned to its regular miserable programming.

Once the last glimmer of light had officially receded, the residents began their depressed march back up the boardwalk. As the crowd thinned out, Jeni stepped closer to Thomas, a finger propped up under her chin. She looked him over, head to toe, a curious expression on her face like someone scrutinizing a police lineup.

“That’s it! I knew something was different!” Jeni exclaimed. “You got new glasses! You look...*professorial!*”

“I don’t think that’s even a word,” said Thomas, blushing faintly. *Of course, it was a word!* he thought. Jeni Myers was even smarter than him. He quickly changed the subject. “Where’s Arnold?” he asked.

“Probably blowing something up at home,” sighed Jeni. “Do you know he did his Concepts of Physics pressurized rocket experiment *inside* the house?”

“Sounds like Arnold,” said Thomas. *He had to ask her...* an image of himself with his pale legs standing all alone in the middle of Splashdown Waterpark flashed inside his brain. “Hey...” he began, gathering his courage. “I was wondering. Are you...it’s no big deal if you aren’t but...are you going with the teen group to Splashdown Mountain this weekend? I was thinking maybe we could—”

“You didn’t hear?” said Jeni, cutting him off. “Oh my god. I’m such a jerk! I totally forgot to tell you! The trip’s been canceled. Pop Mulvaney—”

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a tower of legs and arms knocked into Thomas.

He was the tallest boy at Gloombsbury Middle School, taller even than Thomas. His height advantage seemed to give him a free pass to push others aside like a tropical jungle explorer thrashing his way through tall vegetation...only the vegetation happened to be people. When the tall boy made it through a few bodies he looked back and flashed Thomas a wicked grin. Thomas felt his stomach muscles seize up and tighten. It was Gary Korvin.

I’m sure you know a Gary Korvin in your town or even at your own school. He might be named Larry—Larry Morvin, or Harry Foreman. But he’s the worst. He’s the worst because someone *made* him that way—a brother, a parent, a father who wasn’t around—and now someone can’t *unmake* him. Thomas would never forget the time at the Gloombsbury Pumpkin Festival when Gary pulled an iron rake out of a scarecrow’s hands and told Thomas to “run from his fiery javelin.” No big surprise, Thomas made it about ten feet before the rake hit him behind the knees, and he went down like a lassoed cow. Thomas prayed Jeni didn’t hear what Gary said as he passed by snickering today...but Thomas had heard it, and the words made his fists ball up at his sides:

Out of the way, Creepy Thomas!

It was the name Thomas couldn’t outrun, even with all his track team skills. It followed him everywhere like dog poop in the tread of his sneaker. He had learned to ignore it, but there were some days—mostly after sticking his hands inside a dead body—when the mental armor he had to wear just to be him, just to be alive in his own skin, got worn down so thin that even a wrong look could set him off. As soon as he turned eighteen, he swore he was going to change his name. No Gary Korvin or Barry Torpin would ever taunt

him again. He had already picked out his new name: Chase Radley. (C'mon, admit it! You already want to be friends with Chase Radley!).

Fortunately for Thomas, Jeni didn't hear Gary, or if she did, she ignored him.

"It's horrible," she went on. "I overheard my mom talking on the phone last night. They think Pop died in his sleep. Heart attack, that's what Mrs. Grossman says. Oh, Thomas. It's horrible. They canceled the trip because of the funeral this weekend."

Thomas's breath caught in his lungs. He stared back at Jeni for a few seconds, feeling numb all over, and when the numbness fell away, a hollowness in the center of his chest. Pop was dead? The words didn't make sense, but that's what Jeni had said. Pop couldn't be dead. Pop Mulvaney was the only priest at St. Mary's he actually liked. He told silly jokes and made a point of shaking everybody's hand after Sunday services, even standing in the rain so he didn't miss anyone. Sure, he was old—*grandparent*-old. But he was always there, always around, always smiling and waving outside the giant carved oak doors of St. Mary's or pacing the flagstones trying to find the right words for his Sunday sermon. And now he was gone, just like that. Like the last glimmer of light sucked out over Gloombsbury Bay.

Thomas and Jeni turned and left the beach, following the other stragglers up the boardwalk and back onto Weiland Avenue. When they hit the corner that looked up at the eternally vacant Fisherman's Haven Hotel, Jeni placed a hand on Thomas's arm.

"Are you going to be okay?" she asked, this time without the slightest hint of Jeni Myers sarcasm behind her voice.

"I'm fine," said Thomas, brushing away the arm before Gary or anyone else could see it. "I better get home. I'm sure my dad is already writing my evening list."

Suddenly, one of the windows in the hotel above their heads *thwapped* open.

A paunchy man in half-buttoned overalls, with a massive beard the color of an unwashed golden poodle, poked his head out of the open window holding an orange tabby cat in his outstretched arms. Thomas and Jeni watched dumbstruck as the man proceeded to place the growling cat on the ledge outside the window, then slammed the window shut. As if accustomed to this ritual, the cat sat back on the ledge, happy as a clam, and proceeded to clean itself in the misting rain.

“C’mon,” said Jeni. “I’ll walk back with you.” A smile stretched across her pale face—*pale and freckled*, but not pinched like Thomas’s. A beautiful face. Thomas might tell her someday, if saying it out loud didn’t make his stomach turn over on itself.

“Don’t want you to twist the other ankle,” she added with a giggle.

“Very funny,” said Thomas.

They walked back through the wet cobblestone streets, past Gloombsbury Treats on Thirty-Third and Weiland where they might have stopped for some Mad Marge Marzipan or Shark Tooth Taffy, if Thomas’s father wasn’t already waiting for him. No doubt Thomas’s father, Elijah Creeper the Fifth, would be standing at the large bay window of their old Victorian house, tapping his gold-rimmed glasses impatiently against the windowsill. The image made Thomas cringe because he couldn’t ignore the fact:

He was the spitting image of his father.

He knew it was his destiny to grow as tall and gaunt as Elijah Creeper the Fifth, like all male Creepers who threw themselves into their horrible work, night and day, each one stoop-shouldered from perpetually leaning over corpses.

There would come a time when someone wouldn’t be able to tell the difference between Thomas and his father (besides a few more wrinkles in his father’s face or gray in his beard). That would be the day Thomas took over the funeral home, the day of his inheritance. But Thomas wasn’t supposed to be the heir. That wasn’t the plan. David, who’d loved science

and never—not even once—cringed at the sight of a dead body, was supposed to have taken over as Gloombsbury’s sole mortician.

But David had died a year ago in his sleep, from what Dr. Filch—the town’s quack—had insisted was a heart attack. Thomas supposed there could have been some truth in the diagnosis—who knew how often heart murmurs went undetected, anyway, even in kids?—if it weren’t for the manner in which Dr. Filch had inspected the body. Brandishing the withered remains of an Egyptian hand, the elderly doctor proclaimed that the artifact would point “like a magnetic beacon to the source of David’s mortal illness.” To make matters worse, the morning after David’s death, Thomas’s father insisted that Thomas help him prepare David’s body for the funeral. Thomas still hadn’t forgiven his father for that.

At the intersection of Thayer and Mt. Parnassus—a street that divided the section of Gloombsbury known unofficially as The Uppercrust, the wealthy neighborhood where Jeni’s family lived, from the poorer section, Thayer Row, where the Creepers resided—Jeni gave Thomas a hug.

“I’ll see you Friday at Pop’s funeral,” she told him.

Thomas bit his lip and peered down at the wet ground. The cobblestones blurred under his feet. He could feel the tears brimming at the edges of his eyes, just waiting to ruin everything. He could hear Jeni’s voice...but it wasn’t Pop he was thinking about anymore, not this close to the wretched funeral home. That’s what Jeni didn’t understand. There was something else—*someone else*—gnawing at his heart.

“I know you liked Pop. We all did. But he was old, Thomas. I know that doesn’t make it easier. Maybe...maybe he didn’t feel any pain. Maybe he just went to bed and—”

“It’s not just Pop!” Thomas growled, blinking back hot tears. Jeni’s face snapped back into focus. “I saw her again, Jen! The girl on the stairs! I’m telling you she’s *real*. I don’t want to go back in there. I know she’ll be waiting for me....”

Thomas trailed off. The misting rain had turned to a heavy patter. Rain trickled beneath his collar, chilling him down to his bones.

“She’s not there, Thomas,” said Jeni. She brushed a few wet strands of strawberry blonde hair out of her face until Thomas could see her flashing green eyes shining through the gloom. “Ghosts aren’t real, Thomas. Dead bodies are.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Thomas shot back. *What was she trying to get at? Why would she make things worse by saying something so stupid?*

Jeni shrugged. “All I mean is that the dead can’t hurt you. If they could we’d all be in trouble. Wouldn’t you be angry at someone who could do all the things you couldn’t do anymore?”

“I guess so,” said Thomas. “Like organizing jars of formaldehyde...polishing caskets...”

“You know what I mean,” said Jeni flashing him a sour look. But the sour look didn’t last long. A toothy smile broke over Jeni’s freckled face. “Cheer up, professor!” she cried, patting Thomas on the shoulder. “How about this? Why don’t we go to Sal’s for pizza after my soccer practice tomorrow? We can steal some of Arnold’s fireworks if you have time before tackling your list. And check your email when you get home! I sent you another cipher. I went all out on this one. Just saying...”

Walking away, she glanced back over her shoulder, flashing him a brilliant smile.

A perfect Jeni Myers smile.

“Cool!” Thomas shouted back, brightening a little. “See you later!”

He waved goodbye to Jeni and turned back down Thayer. As if right on cue, guaranteed to quash all happiness and joy, Thomas spied the speeding car careening around the street corner, his weird uncle Jed bobbing in the driver’s seat. The car was sleek and black like a panther and as long as a speedboat. Flying down the street, oblivious to potholes

and cobblestones, came the Creeper family's 1957 Ford Star Model Customline hearse, which they used for all pickups and deliveries. The car honked at Thomas as it flew past, the horn blaring like a mournful goose. A few seconds later the antique hearse slipped out of view, headed for the back entrance of the funeral home—which meant only one thing:

They had a delivery. And Thomas was pretty sure he knew who it was.

He sighed again into his damp collar and trudged down the block until he could feel the shadow of the great house up ahead, its sign swaying precariously from the signpost out front, barely secured by its rusted hinges:

Creeper & Sons Funeral Home
Est. 1878

Behind the mold-speckled sign and rotting gate the old Victorian house loomed like some great black bird, its moldy shingles overlapping one another like feathers on a crow's back. A thick grove of oak and cypress trees surrounded the house, preventing any chance of light from filtering in through the moth-eaten curtains. As Thomas made his way up the sinking flagstone path, mud oozing out from beneath the moss-covered stones with every step, he kept his eyes averted from the figure waiting for him on the porch. It wasn't his father, nor any *living* person for that matter. It was something dead that didn't seem to want to stay that way.

"You aren't real, you aren't real..." Thomas repeated over and over like a protective chant as he gripped the chipped porch railing and began to climb. "Jeni's right. I can't see you. You don't exist."

But he knew he was seeing the girl on the steps—even if Jeni didn't believe him. Ghosts did exist. They were everywhere. They were real as shadows were real, even if you couldn't touch them. And one ghost in particular lived in the funeral home, right alongside Thomas Creeper.

Sometimes Thomas would glimpse her on the porch,

other times in the hallway, standing next to the wooden pedestal that held the large, leatherbound Creeper family diary with entries dating all the way back to the 1800s. The nights when he wasn't at school or assisting his father in the Preparing Room, Thomas would go to the wooden pedestal and flip through the yellowed and cracked pages of the diary, hoping to find something to make her go away—anything, some secret, some clue to the puzzle of why she haunted the old house.

But he never found it. She would disappear for weeks—months sometimes—and then, suddenly, she would appear right next to him, staring back at him with the same stricken expression on her face, her arms folded behind her, hidden within the folds of her dress, her mouth open as if to speak...though no words ever came out.

“Leave me alone,” said Thomas, climbing up the last rotting steps onto the porch.

But the girl didn't move.

Thomas walked right through her, as if she were nothing more than a damp cloud. The death chill surged through his veins, as if he had been dunked into a freezing lake for a split second, then hauled out by his shoulders, shivering. Fighting off chatters in his teeth, he pulled back the screen door and stepped into the musty foyer, teeming with all the horribly familiar smells: the maroon-colored drapes that reeked of mold; the eternal stench of formaldehyde and embalming fluid from the Preparing Room; and the lingering odor of grease that had accompanied whatever beef monstrosity of a meal his mother had recently concocted.

“What happened to your leg?” a deep voice boomed out from the shadows.

“Nothing!” Thomas hollered back.

“Nothing?”

Out of the shadows, into a patch of light cast by the flickering chandelier over the foyer, Elijah Creeper the Fifth stepped forward.

At over six and a half feet tall, Thomas's father cast what people call "a long shadow." Bony and thin as a rail, he resembled a giant grasshopper-human hybrid with glittering black eyes magnified to three times their ordinary size behind glasses with large prescription lenses and long white fingers that were perpetually cold, regardless of the season. There were words that never managed to fight their way to Thomas's father's lips—words that could save rotting relationships—such as, *I love you. I'm sorry. Forgive me. I didn't mean to say all those horrible things...*

"Well, at least that explains you being late!" snapped Elijah Creeper the Fifth, removing an antique pipe from his waistcoat pocket and proceeding to pack strong-smelling tobacco into the bowl. "Why are you always dilly-dallying around town, Thomas? Can't you see we have—"

"A delivery, I know," sighed Thomas. He winced. He knew better than to cut his father off. But he wasn't in the mood to follow Creeper Family Protocol that required the utmost attention and respect between son and father, apprentice and master, but never the other way around. Thomas could feel the lecture coming on, so he clamped it off—as if his father's tirade were a gushing artery. "I saw Uncle Jed's car!" he added quickly. "It's Pop Mulvaney, isn't it?"

Mr. Creeper's eyes narrowed to two black slants behind his smudged glasses as he regarded his son and sole apprentice with pursed lips. The tobacco bowl neatly packed, he lit a match. Bright light flared across his gaunt face. Thomas felt terror wash over him. There was no doubt in his mind: He was looking at himself in thirty years, maybe not even that long!

"Mask and gloves! Five minutes!" bellowed Elijah Creeper the Fifth. Without another word, he turned on his heel and strode down the long hallway toward the Preparing Room, a stream of pipe smoke wafting in his wake.

Letting out another deep sigh, Thomas turned to follow but was brought to an abrupt halt when his eyes caught a

reflection in the foyer mirror. The ghost-girl was peering in at him through the curtains of the bay window that looked out onto the rickety porch.

“Go away,” he said and turned and headed down the dark hallway.



The cooling board consisted of a large gray slab of metal that pulled out from a temperature-controlled cooler. The cooler, and the board on which the body rested, helped slow the rate of decomposition of a fresh corpse so that the mortician had time to cover any wounds and restore the body to a state in which it looked almost alive, as if the person were merely sleeping.

In the old days, as Thomas’s father often reminded him, before temperature-controlled refrigeration, bodies had been kept on giant blocks of ice that dripped everywhere, or at the bottom of root cellars where an unsuspecting stumbler, searching perhaps for a rutabaga or parsnip, might have the shock of their life grabbing hold of stiff fingers already in *rigor mortis*.

(Rigor mortis, in case you didn’t already know, is the stiffening that immediately happens to a corpse after the heart stops pumping blood. Think of a well-done steak left out in the snow for a couple of days and you’ll get the picture.)

Thomas’s father constantly went on and on about “the wonder of refrigeration,” what he proclaimed to be “the mortician’s greatest ally in the race against The Warm!” often letting his voice fall to a dramatic hush on the last two words. *The Warm*... Thomas always cringed when he heard that. *The Warm*—it was like something out of an old black-and-white horror film where happy, well-meaning people slowly got melted down by some mad scientist’s heat laser.

The Preparing Room, where corpses were treated and embalmed, was about as cheery and warm as the North Pole at midnight. Tonight, as Thomas and his father set to work on

Pop Mulvaney, Thomas was sure he'd be able to see his own breath if his sanitary mask hadn't been covering his mouth. The chill numbed his brain and turned the tips of his fingers bone white. It was as if the air knew how to get inside him, chilling him from the inside out—worse, even, than passing through the ghost-girl on the stairs. He tried to focus on his duties, to follow his father's orders, but this time was harder than usual...the corpse, after all, had once been his friend.

Blinking back tears, he gazed down at the body of Pop Mulvaney. He reminded himself that the thing on the table wasn't Pop Mulvaney anymore. He tried to smile, thinking of the old priest as he had been in life—kind Pop Mulvaney, who had picked Thomas up with one arm after he'd skinned his knee, telling him jokes while he fished through the church's medical kit for a Band-Aid; Pop Mulvaney, who brought homemade cinnamon buns and hot chocolate to the teen group's volunteer day; Pop Mulvaney, who once read a poem by an English poet during Sunday service instead of rattling off some stuffy old sermon.

No, thought Thomas, a hard knot forming in his throat. The cold, blue-lipped thing on the table wasn't Pop Mulvaney anymore. It was just his shell. Just as a cicada's shell hangs on a tree before it takes to the wind....

A clatter of metal sounded behind Thomas, startling him.

"What have you done with the aspirator, Elijah Thomas?" his father's voice boomed. "How many times must I tell you," Elijah Creeper the Fifth seethed, waving a bony finger in the air like a dagger, "that a mortician's tools should always be returned to their precise location in the event—"

"A situation calls for accelerated measures to arrest decomposition," Thomas contributed wearily. It was one of the tenets of the Creeper Family Protocol, a doctrine as stony and staunch as the Ten Commandments. Thomas spied the aspirator beneath a stack of newspapers and silently handed it to his father, who fumed in silence, his menacing expression hidden behind the light of the medical lamp shining down

on the corpse. Thomas hated those kinds of tense silences in the Preparing Room. Some nights it was even worse—his father would take a pause in his lecture just long enough for a corpse to emit a “death rattle,” the escaping of a pocket of air through the body cavity or lungs. Nothing fun about that.

Elijah Creeper the Fifth approached the corpse, wielding the autopsy aspirator—a long instrument the size and shape of a child’s bent elbow that could be mistaken for something used, perhaps, for injecting pastry cream into cakes...if only the Creepers had been bakers. The aspirator did nothing so sweet. It removed blood and fluid from a corpse, and the many holes along its sides ensured that nothing got clogged up during this ghastly process.

“What’s going on with you and that Myers girl?” Mr. Creeper asked suddenly, positioning the aspirator over Pop Mulvaney’s carotid artery. “Uncle Jed said he saw you two together?”

“We’re just...friends,” said Thomas in a low voice.

“Just friends?” Mr. Creeper sniffed. He frowned and swiveled back to the instrument tray, selecting the trocar, a long, hollow needle. Then he bent over the corpse as Thomas looked away, squirming like a freshly caught salmon on a fish hook. Thomas hated needles and knew that he would be responsible for disinfecting the trocar after his father was done. This task—along with wiping down the counters, sweeping the floor, and cottoning down the corpse (a particularly dreadful task that involved the insertion of cotton balls into the corpse’s mouth)—formed Thomas’s regular “list” of duties whenever a corpse was in residence at Creeper & Sons.

“Well, I am glad to hear that,” said Mr. Creeper, fitting a hose to the trocar. “These years, Elijah Thomas, are a critical stage in your apprenticeship. By your age I had already performed my first treatment and sealing of a corpse. Can you imagine that?”

Thomas couldn’t. And more importantly—he didn’t want to.

“This is the Creeper life, the Creeper way,” Mr. Creeper continued. “Remember that well, Elijah Thomas. Friends will come and go like ships in the harbor. But family...family is the dock, my boy, steadfast and sure, keeping everything grounded amid the shifting tides.”

Mr. Creeper paused and smiled, clearly pleased with his maritime analogies. “Now finish your inventory and you may be dismissed. Your mother thinks you need some...*time* to let this all set in. I know you were fond of Father Mulvaney.”

Thomas nodded and set about his evening list: disinfecting the instruments, inventorying the massive jars of formaldehyde, and making sure that there were ample supplies of cotton balls, latex gloves, sanitary masks, and, of course, several tubs of bleach.

When all was tidy, Thomas removed his mask and gloves and dropped them in the garbage bin. At the door of the Preparing Room he paused and looked back at his father, whose arms moved as if in some kind of strange symphony, like a conductor, only his father’s baton was a needle. Thomas could hear him as he bent over the corpse, murmuring softly as he lovingly went about his work. Thomas made sure to muffle his groan of disgust in the palm of his hand before he closed the door.

He left the Preparing Room and padded his way to the kitchen door, which was ajar.

He could see his mother inside, sitting motionless at one end of the kitchen table that had been set for the evening meal. In one hand, his mother clutched a white dinner napkin from the fourth place setting, the one she set every evening for David and cleared after the meal was done.

Thomas headed down the dark hallway to the winding staircase that rose to the turreted section of the old Victorian house. He wasn’t hungry. How could anyone eat after sticking their hands in a corpse’s mouth, especially somebody you’d once known? Head drooping, like an exhausted soldier returned from the brutal theater of war, he ascended the

creaking staircase and went into his bedroom, closing the door behind him.

From a locked drawer in his desk, he retrieved the iPhone his parents had given David on his fifteenth birthday. The service had long since been cut off, of course, but Thomas had successfully hacked his father's Wi-Fi password and made regular use of the email app.

Two new messages from Jeni waited in his inbox—one, with the latest cipher she hoped to stump him with, and another with “*SO??????????*” in the subject line. Thomas loved anything to do with spies and code breaking and had read every book in the Gloombsbury Memorial Library about spycraft. He hoped to be a spy someday...or a writer...or a combination of both if the job existed, which he was pretty sure it didn't. Tonight, however, he didn't think that even an email with a brain-stumping cipher from Jeni could lighten his spirits. After all, it was their mutual interest in spycraft that had brought them together in the first place.

Jeni went to a private school in nearby Rhode Island called Hampswich that had a program for “accelerated students.” They probably would never have met at all if it hadn't been for a book fair at Gloombsbury Memorial Library where she and Thomas had both reached for the same book, *Spies, Ciphers, and Poisoned Capsules: A C.I.A. Operative Tells All*. From that day on they became fast friends.

Thomas powered off the phone just as Moses, the family's large Maine Coon cat, pushed his way through the door and leapt onto Thomas's bed. The cat meowed plaintively until Thomas retrieved a small tin of cookies from under the bed. He fed Moses a few butter cookies and listened to the cat munching in the darkness for a while before drifting off to sleep.

Sometime in the middle of the night he awoke, shivering.

He had cracked the window open a few inches the night before, hoping to air out the smells of the musty, old house, but had forgotten to close it. His bedsheets lay in a pile on

the floor next to an open—and empty—tin of cookies. *Stupid cat*, he thought, climbing out of bed and fastening the lid back on the tin. A gust of chilly wind swept through the room, rustling the curtains and raising goosebumps all across Thomas's skin. He turned to close the window. But peering out into the darkness, he froze.

Under one of the streetlamps a black car idled. Grabbing his glasses from his bedside table, Thomas peered out, over the overgrown yard swirling with fresh fog, to the street beyond. It wasn't his family's Customline hearse. This car had a long hood rounded on the sides, like the barrel of a gun, and bright headlights that lit up the pavement. A spare wheel was fastened to the side, just like a car from an old gangster film.

Three figures, clad in dark suits and wearing matching English bowler hats, were gathered around the car. (Bowler hats, in case you don't know—and Thomas certainly did—were hats with rounded sides favored by detectives like John Watson in the illustrated Sherlock Holmes mysteries Thomas loved to read.) Feeling a weird mixture of fear and excitement, Thomas leaned farther out the window, hoping to get a better look at the figures amid the swirling fog. The three men appeared to be in the middle of some intense discussion. *What on earth were they doing out there, arguing in front of his house this late at night?* Thomas wondered, wishing he could hear what they were saying. Then the thought occurred to him: The Surveillance 6000, his new spy sound recorder and microphone, would be perfect for the task.

He had secretly purchased the set of spy tools online a few months before, a surprise he had hoped to share with Jeni when the summer months got boring, which they always did. The long condenser microphone could pick up sounds from over a hundred and fifty feet away...or so the manufacturer had promised.

Heart racing, he grabbed the recorder from where he had stashed it in the bottom of his sock drawer, powered it on, and positioned the long condenser mic of the Surveillance 6000

on the windowsill. He pulled the headphones over his ears and listened.

The men's voices were strange—all whispery and silky, as if an orchestra of whispers had been looped through an old tape machine. The sound made the hairs on the back of Thomas's neck stand straight up. Within the strange chorus of whispers, he could distinguish a few words: *The priest...he has it...the location...he has it.*

Suddenly, one of the men detached from the group. He circled around the car and passed through the unlatched gate...heading straight for the steps to the house! Thomas gasped and nearly dropped the microphone. *What was the man doing? What could he possibly want with the Creepers?* As the man came closer, the moonlight shone through the gaps in the cypress trees above the house, illuminating the lower half of his face not hidden by the shadow of his bowler. Thomas wanted to cover his eyes. The man's skin was sickly white, paler than the moonlight, and a wicked smile played upon his pale lips. Even from such a distance, high up in his bedroom, the smile made Thomas feel horribly uneasy. The man crept closer, crossing the muddy flagstones, but after a few paces he stopped short.

A small white figure appeared on the wet flagstones, blocking his path.

The ghost-girl! Thomas realized, recognizing the small, pale silhouette.

A weird, raucous laughter erupted from the men around the car, blaring in Thomas's headphones. Advancing toward the ghost-girl, the grinning man began to slowly pull back his jacket sleeves. Thomas's eyes widened with horror. *The man's arms glowed!* They were covered were dozens of fluorescent tattoos that squirmed and writhed across the skin as if they were alive. The ghost-girl, however, to Thomas's astonishment, seemed unconcerned. Turning her head, she stared into the shadows of the overgrown bushes framing the house as the bushes started to rattle.

Out of the shadows something large but invisible, like a freak cloud of wind, burst forth. Gripping the windowsill with trembling fingers, Thomas leaned farther out to see what might cause such a disturbance. He could see large footprints in the grass—but no body making them. The men's weird laughter died in his headphones as the ghost-girl turned to face the grinning man once more. Slowly, she removed her arms from within the folds of her dress.

Thomas covered his mouth, muffling the cry before it could give him away.

One of the girl's arms was missing at the elbow, ending in a jutting white bone and a mass of red tendons. She raised her severed arm and the invisible cloud of wind started spinning around the yard like a cyclone, rattling the railings and shutters, sending a flurry of dry leaves across the pavement, and knocking the man to his knees. Clambering to his feet, he pulled down his sleeves, and the wild, writhing light disappeared. Before turning back to the car, he cast a long, lingering glance up toward Thomas's bedroom window. Thomas slunk down a few inches, gripping the microphone against his chest. His heart pounded up in his throat. When he inched back up again he could see it: the man staring up at his window! Flashing one last ghoulish grin, the man slipped out the rotting gate and climbed inside the black car waiting at the curb. The engine revved like the throaty growl of a wild animal, then peeled off into the fog, its two red taillights trailing down the block.