

Nightcrawler

K.P.GILLBERT

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DEDICATION

To my lovely wife, who has been so supportive, and
most of all, the inspiration for all this.

ἐνθα γὰρ σοφίης δεῖ, βίης ἔργον οὐδέν.-(Ηρόδοτος)

Where wisdom is required, violence is unnecessary.
(Herodotus)

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*Dark as the dark can be...
Eyes like the fire bright be...
Black flesh of fear it bears...
Screams that the soul it dreads...
Behind the shadows' curtains crawls...
Into the Death's embrace it calls...*



PROLOGUE

Harvester

The scythe gleamed in the dusk. It was enormous, just like the man that wielded it. Its blade, so sharp that you'd have thought it might cut the air.

Harvester, they called him.

Children named him so, but it was commonly heard among adults too. *Harvester*, they called him and he wore a hood with a long cloak. His pace was slow and heavy. Perhaps it was the weight of the scythe. Perhaps it was the lateness of the hour. He entered the Graveyard as soon as the last light died. He shuffled away from the side entrance -an entrance few knew or

used- towards the tall Statue in the back of the area. He stopped in front of it.

There was an imperceptible breeze ruffling gently through the leaves in the trees, as well as the end of his cloak. They looked at each other. The tall, female Statue and the cloaked man. One dead as stone, one with a low breath like a roar. The Harvester's mind shifted elsewhere. To a distant past. In his mind, he saw lights.

Red and blue lights. The night's silence being torn apart by the continuous, penetrating sound of the sirens. People were running to and fro frantically. Others shouting on the phone waving their hands in desperation; others writing things on paper, shooting occasional glimpses at the boy standing beside the Ambulance.

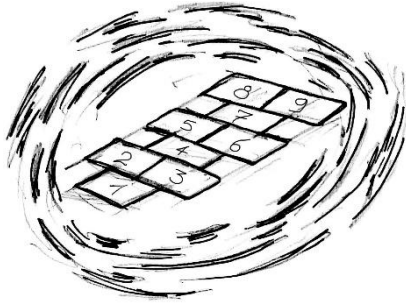
The boy stared at exactly nowhere. His gaze was utterly still, transfixed on the blankness of the night. A chubby, red-haired nurse was telling him things that the boy didn't seem to be or perhaps couldn't, listen to. At the same time, she was desperately trying to clean his face, to wipe away a red substance. Eventually, the boy stared at his hands. For a peculiar reason, they had stopped trembling. His face hardened, his fists clenched, his teeth gritted. The nurse took an involuntarily backwards step. She removed her hands from the boy's face.

Another man, with broad shoulders, came. He seemed taken aback by the boy's hardened expression too.

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'Brendan, was it?' he said, almost to himself. 'Come my boy, we need to take you somewhere else. To ask you some questions.'

A sound broke his thoughts. A few paces away, something stirred behind the graves; Kevin Plougher could hardly breathe.



CHAPTER 1

A Lost Bet

Kevin removed the already loose board from the window frame and tried to peer inside. Total Darkness. Soon, though, as his vision adjusted to the dim lighting, indistinct figures and shapes started to form. But, still, it was too dark. That dreadful sensation of plunging into the unknown kicked hard on Kevin. Second thoughts were storming his mind about entering that place. He certainly had regrets now that it came to it. How on earth had he landed on this? Oh, yes. *That* stupid bet he lost. The one he had foolishly pledged himself upon just yesterday. The

loser had to enter the most eerie and frightful building in the whole village.

It started, as anyone would have guessed, on a whim, on the spur of the moment, a moment poorly thought out by Kevin. But Kevin was always like that, impulsive and an 'act first – think later' person.

For Kevin Plougher, denizen of Heartington, number 3, Joule St., summer holidays held a special place. It meant that he was going to his grandparents' house in the lovely little village of Rookville, a few miles outside of Heartington. His friends and his cousin would also be there for their summer holidays as usual. But this time a surprise was waiting for him. Besides going into Rookville, all of the above wouldn't happen. Also, his stay at his grandparents was to be shortened this time. He would stay there only for a week this summer due to Ploughers' vacation schedule.

A disgruntled Kevin arrived at his beloved place only to find out that things were getting worse. A last-minute call from his aunt and uncle bearing the news that his cousin, Shaun, wouldn't be coming this year. Also, his grandparents informed him that his friend Charlie won't be there as well.

'Fantastic!' exclaimed Kevin. 'This is getting better by the minute.'

Crushed by the horrible news, Kevin went to the garden to inspect the flowers, since his parents were having a chat

with his grandparents. His grandparents had –in Kevin’s opinion– a beautiful house and the most awesome garden in the whole village.

Eventually, Kevin's parents had to leave, but before doing so, Kevin's dad approached him. He was a broad man with a booming voice, hearty laughter, and a bushy moustache. He was an agriculturalist, but he also liked crafting, mending broken things (not entirely successfully), fishing, and painting among many other things. A restless kind of person, an aspect that Kevin's mom insisted had passed on to Kevin.

‘Kevin.’ said his dad, ‘as long as you are here, I want you to be very nice to your grandpa and Nana, ok? Don't want any disrespectful things, alright?’

‘Why wouldn't I be?’ complained Kevin. ‘I-’

‘You know what I mean,’ cut him in his father, glaring at him. ‘Also...’ he added, his moustache quivering intently trying not to laugh and occasionally shooting glimpses at Kevin's mom. ‘Try not to get up to any excessive mischief, will you?’

‘Of course not, dad! Rest assured!’ said Kevin who looked as if his birthday had been twice this year.

‘What are the two of you talking about over there in secret? I hope it's not your usual nonsense!’ Kevin's mom had been staring at them with her arms folded and a very inquisitive look on her face.

Kevin and his dad jumped upright in a flash.

'N-Nothing dear, just giving the boy some advice!' stammered his dad. His mum, though, didn't seem fully convinced. She scrutinized them both and muttered, 'you better be!'

All in all, Kevin thought that his dad wasn't afraid of anything with the sole exception being his mom. The strange thing was that this bizarre power was also present in his grandma and as the years went by, Kevin started to think that this must be a certain trait in women. Especially married ones.

His parents left after a quarter of an hour of advice that easily escalated to warnings. As soon as their car took the turn, Kevin turned to his granddad.

'Grandpa?'

'Yes, my boy?' replied Mr Plougher Sr.

'Can we go to the mountain?' To Kevin this hill overlooking the village of Rookville always seemed like a mountain, hence he and his friends always referred to it that way. To the rest of the village and especially outsiders, it seemed more like a bump – much to the villagers' frustration.

'I'm afraid not, my boy,' said his granddad, much to Kevin's disappointment.

'But you can go first thing in the morning!' added his grandma and Kevin's face lit with excitement.

'Can I at least go and play with the others at the square?'

'I don't know...,' said his grandma. 'It's kinda late dear, and you've only just arrived...'

Kevin was ready to protest but his grandpa came to his aid. 'I'll go with him, Susan. I have to be in the coffee-house in 5 minutes. We have our weekly meeting about the state of the cattle! Another sheep went missing last night. I swear this is absurd. Who's been taking them and where does he hide them anyway? If I was-'

'Kayden, you'd better watch out that the boy and see he doesn't get hurt!' said Mrs Plougher Sr. sharply, pointing a finger at him. 'Or else you'll be finding yourself another place to stay tonight!'

'The chicken coop will do then!' muttered Kevin's grandad. Kevin laughed loudly and his Grandparents joined soon.

Mrs Plougher Sr. suddenly jumped.

'OH!' she squeaked. 'Is it seven already?' she approached Kevin and asked him gently. 'Fancy a cup of tea, dear? Or perhaps a biscuit?'

'No thanks Nana!' answered Kevin.

His grandma gasped violently and made a gesture as if someone had insulted her in the crudest way. Denying his grandmom the chance to offer him a handmade biscuit? Preposterous! Kevin stepped back apprehensively. His

grandfather, though, chuckled and put his arm on Kevin's shoulder.

'Anarchy! Anarchy in our beloved House!' he said, faking a serious tone. 'No sir! Back in my days, this kind of thing was considered nothing but treason! Oh, the times we live in!' Kevin suppressed a laugh. Even his nana spit out a smile. They left the house shouting like they were protesting: 'Anarchy in the noble house of Ploughers!'

'Make sure you don't stay late!' shouted Kevin's grandma as they walked down the road. 'Dinner will be ready at nine! We have omelette!' She knew that omelette was Kevin's favourite food. Actually, Kevin liked eggs so much that he didn't mind them being boiled, deep-fried, or scrambled. In fact, once, during an Easter holiday, he ate so many hard-boiled eggs (seven to be precise not counting the smuggled ones) that his grandma had to call his mom. After that Kevin never tried the same thing again, at least not in front of his mom or grandma.

Rookville was a very peculiar albeit interesting case of a countryside village. It was first built by a group of nomadic people, originating from the Mediterranean, specifically from Greece. The curious thing is, that, after all those years of being integrated with the local culture, the people living there still kept some of the customs and traditions they had back home. For example, they had the architecture of the

locals but the street and the whole village planning had their roots in Greece. Their everyday customs had more Mediterranean air than the country they resided in.

Kevin saw the familiar, circular Village Square with its white tiles and its wooden benches stationed in each corner (serving, conveniently enough, as goalposts when it came to playing football). The large trees positioned around the perimeter of the square, apart from casting their refreshing shadow during the hot summer days, also served as assets for various games.

Kevin could hear the children playing even before he and his grandpa took the turn. Most of the children that used to gather around the village's square during the holidays were already there. William 'Billy' Laycedge, a chubby short boy; Archibald 'Archie' Thommasson, a tall broad boy slightly older than Kevin; Margaret 'Margo the Cargo' Laycedge, Billy's older sister; and of course, among many others, Kevin's nemesis Jack 'the Jackal' Kassingle. Jack was a short, skinny boy with pointy teeth and a crooked nose. Kevin didn't like Jack at the best of times. 'He makes stupid jokes, he wears stupid clothes, and his laughter sounds like a turkey with a helium breather!' was Kevin's reply for why he didn't like Jack. Everything about Jack was stupid according to Kevin and when Kevin's mom

told him that he was being ridiculous he said that she didn't understand him at all.

Truth be told, Kevin started to dislike Jack after a certain incident, in which he, Shaun and Charlie were involved. They were trying to build a self-exploding dust machine ('The Exhuminator') which was, in any case, bound to fail due to having numerous necessary parts missing. Jack wanted to get involved but Kevin wouldn't let him because he wasn't part of the team and Jack went on and snitched on the three of them to their grandparents. The aftermath had all three of them getting grounded for three days. After that, Jack was considered a 'mortal enemy'. Being a snitch was considered the highest treason in the children's code book. They banned Jack from nearly every game for a week which brought more tension between him and the three of them.

Kevin told his grandfather that he was going to play with the rest of the children and ran off to the Square. Everyone (or nearly everyone) greeted Kevin warmly and then immediately resumed their games with Kevin joining in. After an exhausting game of football in which Kevin scored zero goals, the boys sat on one of the benches under the largest tree and tried to decide what the next game would be.

'Who's that cu- -erm- blonde girl over there?' coughed Kevin disregarding most of the boys' conversation. He was

pointing at a blonde girl with green eyes standing at the other side of the Square, where the girls usually gathered. Kevin knew most of the girls, but this one he hadn't seen before and she had just made an impression on him.

'That pretty girl,' replied Archie with a smirk, 'is Annette Perkflower. She arrived a couple of days ago.'

'What?' said Kevin, completely taken aback. His mom had mentioned that Annette had returned from Germany with her parents. She was completely different from what he used to remember. She was-

The loud noise of the rest of the boys bursting into laughter made Kevin snap out of it. Kevin tried to look bemused but he knew perfectly well why they were laughing hard.

'Ooooooh, nothing!' imitated in a girly voice Larry Gersing. Larry was a thin, dark-haired boy and the son of the Baker of the village. Larry had two peculiar features, according to Kevin. One of his ears was pricklier than its counterpart so most of the boys called him L(ear)y. The other one was that he was best friends with Jack.

'Shut it, Leary, you big-one-ear baboon!' spat Kevin who considered himself quite good at coming up with names. Everyone roared with laughter except Larry who turned scarlet.

'Say that again!' said Larry with gritted teeth.

'I said,' retorted Kevin, 'shut it, you One-and-a-Half-Ear Leary!' Kevin had done it. He had struck gold. Both boys started throwing names at one another like rifles shooting on burst mode. They conjured whatever crossed their minds.

'Cabin Kevin!'

'Hairy Larry!'

'Kevin the pomplicator- dishwasher, cower Plougher!'

'Larry the eartrumpet-externicator, Farting-Gersing! Sing us a song of Ger- Gersing!'

Jack came to Larry's rescue. Both Larry and Jack launched an attack on Kevin who was desperately trying to answer both of them. Kevin wished Shaun or Charlie were here so they could show those two stupid boys what their combined strength could do. It was common knowledge that the three of them were top-notch at making names, especially Shaun who could come up with some extraordinarily weird names and taunts.

But Kevin wasn't going to show any weakness least of all before these two. He replied even more fiercely than before. Soon they started shouting so much that even the girls stopped giggling. The ruckus caught the attention of the grown-ups sitting in the nearby cafeterias. Since no one wanted to get grounded or cause any more problems with the Big-Ones, as they called them, they all stopped abruptly, just before the word-exchanging duel turned into

a fight. There was a big silence to clear the waters as they waited for the Grown-ups to get back to their own conversations. Then the girls approached.

‘How about you silly little boys stop that annoying nonsense and play a game with us?’ It was Margo the Cargo. She stood taller than the rest of the girls. Such was the surprise of the boys that they stood like a frozen videotape. Finally, Archie spoke.

‘Really?’ he said incredulously. ‘And what game would that be if I may ask?’

‘How about Hide and Seek?’ said Margo.

‘If you think you can cope!’ snorted Archie and Margo's eyes flashed dangerously.

‘We will destroy you!’ said a tall girl with curly hair beside Margo. It was Stacey ‘Chasey’ Burbon. She was the fastest girl when it came to running, and extremely antagonistic when it came to competing against boys, hence the nickname ‘Chasey’. In truth, she was faster than any of the children in the village. Rumour had it that she was so fast that once she had outrun a bike. The boys, though, disregarded this because they thought it too shameful for them to get beaten by a girl in any aspect.

‘We’ll see about that!’ said Jack emerging from behind. Secretly, Jack liked Stacey but he didn't want to show it in front of everyone, since nearly all the boys thought that Stacey was way out of his league.

‘Why don't we bet on it then?’ said Stacey with a thirsty expression.

‘What kind of bet?’ said Archie, slightly apprehensively. He knew that when Stacey tried to bet on something it usually meant big trouble for the loser.

‘Losers will have to do anything the winners say.’ And, before Archie could utter a single word, Margo interrupted. ‘For a day.’ She said and sneered. But then she saw Archie smiling and the smile left her face.

‘It's on!’ said Archie, this time being the one sneering.

‘In case of a tie?’ asked Kevin.

‘In that unlikely case,’ said Margo, ‘we have to craft a new bet.’

‘Meaning?’ asked Larry who wasn't the brightest when it came to complex games.

‘Meaning,’ sighed Margo, ‘that we will play two games. One is ‘Hide and Seek’ and the other is ‘Chase’. If no team scores 2 wins, then we will play Dodgeball! The first one to come out of each team will have to battle each other.’

‘Why don't we play three games from the start and the team that wins two games out of three is the winner?’ suggested Billy Laceyde. Of course, it was the most logical thing to do but everyone told Billy to shut it and that it was a thing of principle and other gibberish.

The bet was set. Both ‘Leaders’ Margo and Archie shook hands each with a smirk on their face. The battle

commenced. Both teams bared their teeth and claws and stooped like eagles on their prey. After the usual accusations about cheating in both games, the score was tied one all. The Girls won 'Chase' (with Chasey being the MVP) and the boys won 'Hide and seek'. Peter Snoozle, a boy who could sleep at any given time and place, accidentally won the game as no one could find him. The truth was that Peter had lost track of time and place, and the rest of them had completely forgotten about him.

Since the first two of each team to come out were Gus Anterton, a round boy of 6 years, and Evelyn Anterton, Gus's younger sister, aged 5, they were deemed too young to compete. Each team agreed to find a representative through a lottery to avoid any cheating. No girl or boy under the age of seven or eight would be eligible.

The dice were cast and the chosen ones were found. Kevin and Annette. As the boys were the first to lose a game, the girls got to choose the game that would decide the final winner. They chose Hopscotch. All the boys sighed regretfully. It was a well-known fact that girls were far better at Hopscotch than boys. Hopscotch required delicacy, precision and speed. Speed for boys wasn't a problem, but delicacy and precision were by far the worst thing. For Kevin, at least, as his mother commented, delicacy is a word not known; or that Kevin was as delicate as a hurried elephant walking through a China shop.

Against all odds, Kevin did try his best only to lose on the last 'return trip', due to a tumble he took in order to gain the advantage over Annette who was going so smoothly on this game as if she was a young gazelle. Despite Kevin trying to blame his performance on the fact that he had injured his left foot during the football match, the result was the same. The girls had won.

There was an unmistakable restlessness amongst the boys' ranks now. What would the girls ask? Margo strutted majestically towards the boys who had gathered like bees around honey. The rest of the girls followed with sinister smiles on their faces. Margo cleared her throat. A sense of foreboding rose in every boy's mind. And for a very good reason. What Margo proceeded to say made every single one of the boys falter.

'We decided that the loser must enter the Haunted House.'

NIGHTCRAWLERS

