

Paladin

By Tod Goldberg

Tuesday morning, before the worst of the storm hit, Bennie Toellner called me at the sheriff's office to see if I could go look in on his twelve-year-old son, Kurt. He was home sick and Bennie'd been called to help a disabled fishing boat. "I don't know the situation out on the water," he said. Bennie was with a Coast Guard rescue crew, operating out of the marina thirty miles west of Granite City, on the southern coast of Washington, at the tip of the Long Beach Peninsula. "If someone's hurt, could be I don't get back until evening. I tried calling the house, but Kurt didn't pick up or it didn't go through. Guess I'm a little worried."

I looked out the window. Rain was falling at a slant. "Wind's already pretty bad," I said. "Wouldn't be surprised if phone service out your way is spotty." This was 1985, but in my mind, it could be Tuesday. "Where's Jane at?" I'd known Bennie and Jane Toellner for my entire life. Bennie and I had gone to high school together and Jane, back when she was Jane Patterson, had lived down the street from Katherine, my late first wife. She was a stewardess now, working for Alaska Air.

"Brawton," he said.

"What's she doing up there?"

"We separated," Bennie said.

"Oh, shit, Bennie," I said. "When did that happen?"

“A couple nights ago,” Bennie said. “It was a long time coming, to be honest.”

“You should have called me.”

“Me and Kurt have been trying to figure things out on our own,” Bennie said. “I didn’t want to bother you.”

“It’s no bother,” I said, “we’re friends.”

“You got a lot of responsibility.”

“Still.”

Bennie was silent for a moment, then he said, “I don’t even really know if Kurt’s sick. He said his nose was stuffed up. I didn’t want to fight about it. Shit, Morris, I’m a damn wreck and now this.”

“I get it,” I said.

“I tried to leave a message for Deena Vlach on the phone, see if she could come by after school to watch *General Hospital* and make dinner, but that’s another couple hours. And who knows when she might get it.”

“I’ll head over,” I said.

“Might be better if Deena brought Kurt to her place, now that I think about it.”

“We’ll figure it out,” I said.

“Wind is already thirty knots at Point Komo,” Bennie said. “It’s gonna be an adventure.”

“Be safe out there. I got your son handled.”

“I appreciate it, Morris,” Bennie said. “I get back, we’ll get a beer or six.”

That would never happen. By nightfall, Bennie Toellner would be lost to the sea, along with the entire crew of his rescue tug and the fishermen they went to save, plus fifteen miles of coastline. Half the hull of the Coast Guard tug washed up on a beach in Oregon a year later, but no bodies were ever recovered. But their ghosts, oh, they still walk the streets of Granite City.



BENNIE AND HIS family lived in a two-story ranch house on the south side of Yeach Mountain, about fifteen minutes from the center of town. Their property stretched for a dozen acres to the east—ending at Nel’s Pond, which was fed by Yeach’s annual snowmelt and which Bennie kept stocked with rainbow trout—and another few acres west, before it dropped into Patterson Gulch, which ran all the way to the Interstate and was named for Jane’s pioneer ancestors. In the summer, Bennie and Jane let locals park on their property to hike out to the pond to fish or picnic. They even built a couple tables and put out some garbage cans, though most people were respectful and carried their own trash back out. Knock on the door and be polite, you could use their bathroom or get some ice for your cooler. It was just how it was.

On that day, however, the long gravel road leading up to the house was already under an inch of water, which made the drive perilous since half the road hugged the gulch and its forty-foot drop. Even in the best weather the gulch had claimed cars, ATVs, bikes, and at least one UPS truck over the years, their skeletons visible in fire season when the county would come to prune the thick brush. So, by the time I pulled up to the house, I’d already made the decision that Deena Vlach could stay home and I’d sit with Kurt.

I got out of my cruiser and ran up the front steps to the Toellners partially enclosed front porch. They had a wicker couch, two wicker chairs, a low wicker-and-glass coffee table, which was covered in books and painted miniature figurines—dragons, elves, wizards—and a stack of what looked to me to be maps. There were two cans of RC Cola on the table, too, and a plate that had a smudge of peanut butter and bits of crust. I picked up the plate and walked in through the screen door, which was propped open with an old tennis shoe.

The TV was on in the living room—someone was looking for a P on *Wheel of Fortune*—and there was another can of RC on the coffee table in front of the sofa and even more figures and maps, plus a bowl of half-eaten mac and cheese.

“Kurt?” I called out. “It’s Morris Drew.”

Nothing.

I went around the sofa and turned off the TV before Vanna could flip around a letter. Picked up the empty RC and the bowl of noodles, took them into the kitchen. There were bowls in the sink, a pan with dried mac and cheese on the stove, a note on the kitchen table for Kurt, along with a \$20 bill:

Order a pizza or some Chinese. Be sure to take a couple Actifed. Love you, Dad.

There was a box of Actifed open on the counter, two pills missing. Kurt must have helped himself, gotten tired and headed to bed upstairs, so I washed the dried mac and cheese out of the pan, cleaned up the plate with the peanut butter, washed out the half-eaten bowl of noodles, went back out front and grabbed the empty RC cans, tossed everything in the trash outside, then finally headed upstairs to check on the kid.

All in, I was there maybe five minutes before I went upstairs. How many times in those early days did I play those minutes out? How many times did I wonder if it made any difference whatsoever, the order of things? What if I’d left my office ten minutes earlier? What if I’d had a deputy already out on the road head over? What if Jane hadn’t walked out on both of them? My god. *What if* is the infinity that makes an old man wish to die in his sleep, if only sleep was so easy to come by.

When I came up the stairs, I saw that Kurt’s bedroom door was open and I could hear that the radio was on. I never did know the name of the song that was playing, only that for the next several decades I’d hear it in the background while I bought groceries, or while I stood in an elevator, or on the soundtrack of some movie, and I’d be brought right back to Kurt Toellner’s empty bedroom, to his unmade bed, to the spatter of his blood and tissue on the wall, the ceiling, soaking into his *Star Wars* sheets, and a scream would rise

up in the back of my throat and I'd have to fight to keep it down, just as I had on that terrible day, so long ago.



"I FOUND BRAIN matter on the pillow and walls," Dr. Louis Digiangreco, our medical examiner, said. He lived a mile away and had a truck, so when I radioed in, he was the first to arrive. It took one of my deputies, Porter, another thirty minutes to show up. Half of Granite City was already underwater. Porter was inside now, processing everything, so I waited out on the front patio. I'd already walked through the house without paying any mind, which might have corrupted the scene, so Porter needed to account for every room I'd been in. It gave me a chance to go through the books and maps and the tiny figurines, trying to figure out what the hell I was looking at.

"How much?"

"Too much to survive without."

"Shit."

"My guess? You're looking for a sledgehammer. Ten pound or more. The velocity to make those spatters must have been something. And then a body without much of a head."

"He was twelve years old," I said. "Who would do that to a twelve-year-old?"

"You get Bennie on the radio yet?"

"No luck," I said. "He was on a rescue."

"Jane?"

"We're sending local Brawton boys to get her. Phones are down up there already. This storm is no joke. We think she's probably at her mother's, but fact is, we don't know."

Louis shook his head. "Look, that blood was dry. Boy's been dead a bit."

"How long, you think?"

“Hard to say. Drop of blood dries in a couple minutes, but those pools? That’s an hour, at least. Maybe two. Depends on the surface. There was still some stickiness, so I’d say anywhere between two hours and a day. With the weather like this? Lotta moisture in the air? You’d need a real forensic investigator to figure that out. I’m just hypothesizing. It could be yesterday.”

“But Bennie called this morning,” I said. A moment that lasted forty years passed between us. Louis knew the life I’d lived in Korea and Vietnam and the life I lived here, in Granite City, knew that I’d witnessed multitudes of mistakes and bad choices, most hallmarked by profound violence.

“Like I said,” Louis said. “Could be a pretty big goddamn open window.”

I picked up an intricately painted dragon figure. “What do you make of these?”

Louis put on his glasses. “Lizzie has a bunch,” he said. Lizzie was his daughter. She was about Kurt’s age. “Gets them down at the comic book shop over by the JC. Part of some game she’s into.” He picked up one of the books. “Yeah, yeah, this. All the kids are playing it.” It was the *Dungeons & Dragons Beginner’s Guide*.

I thumbed through it. It didn’t make much sense to me. A lot of talk of spells and quests and magical beings.

“You play it alone?” I asked.

“No, no,” Louis said. “You need friends.”

“How many?”

“Lizzie, it’s always three or four of them.”

“Shit,” I said and got up from the patio, ran out back to the garbage cans, where I’d dumped the RC Cola cans, fished them out, brought them inside and put them in evidence bags. They were soaking wet. Maybe we’d be able to get a fingerprint, other than my own.

“Sheriff?” Shanna from dispatch came through my radio.

“Go ahead,” I said.

“Brawton police found Jane Toellner.”

“Okay,” I said. “They bringing her down?”

“Highway 37 is flooded out at the Meriss grade. They want permission to tell her the news.”

“I can only confirm that Kurt is missing,” I said. Which was true. But we wouldn’t be able to start searching for him, or his body, for at least a day. I wasn’t entirely certain how Louis, Porter, and I were even going to get off the Toellners’ property. I looked out the window, tried to find the contours of Yeach in the distance, but storm clouds and rain obscured it from my vision completely.

“Okay,” Shanna said. “We’ll go with that.”

“Tell her I’m on it, though, okay? Soon as the rain lets up, we’re going to run a grid search through the land out back, but I can’t have anyone trying to mess around in this weather. We’ve got lightning splitting trees out this way.”

“Will do, Sheriff.”

Porter came down the stairs then with bags of evidence. I showed him the cans, told him about the dishes I’d cleaned, took him out front, showed him the game materials. “Heard that game was Satanic,” Porter said.

“How can a game be Satanic?” I asked.

“I’m just telling you what I heard,” he said. “My mother saw it on *60 Minutes*. Makes kids kill themselves.”

“Are you of the opinion that Kurt Toellner bludgeoned himself to death, Deputy?” Louis asked.

“Well, Doctor, no, I’m not,” he said. “But if you believe in the inspired word of God as I do, you would know that Satan can enter a man and cause him to act in terrible ways. That’s just a fact.”

“Is it now?” Louis said.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s not bring God into this. He can’t take the stand.”

“No, indeed not,” Porter said. “And anyway, this was some Godless shit here, Sheriff.”



IT WOULD BE another ten hours before the storm let up enough that we were even able to leave the Toellners' house. By then, the news about Bennie's Coast Guard rescue team being lost at sea was everywhere—Tom Brokaw led off the national evening news with it, along with shots of the devastation along the coast—so when I finally got home, my wife Margaret was sitting at the kitchen table, sobbing.

“I can't stop,” she said. “First I think about Kurt being missing, then I think about Bennie, and then I think about poor Jane, up there in Brawton, powerless.”

“I know,” I said.

“When will you start the search? First light? Do you think he just ran off? I mean. Boys do stupid things. Could he have hopped a bus to Brawton?”

“Margaret,” I said, “he's missing, but I don't think he's alive.” I told her what we found at the scene.

“That just can't be,” she said. She got up from the table, went to the cabinet above the refrigerator, pulled down a bottle of Jameson. Neither of us were drinkers, really, but she poured us both a couple fingers.

“I think there were other kids there yesterday,” I said after a time. “We found evidence, anyway. We'll have search and rescue out at dawn, but I need to see who maybe he was playing with, hopefully someone just comes forward. We'll get a deputy out to the John Glenn Middle School in the morning, find out what we can.”

“I hope so.”

I crawled into bed thirty minutes later and already heard the drone of helicopters in the night sky, news and military, I figured, documenting and searching, though the end result was inevitable. Hope was for the living. A charade to appease the unknowable fear

of reality. Bennie Toellner was dead. His son Kurt was missing and presumed dead. And Jane Toellner was an hour north in Brawton, sobbing on her mother's shoulder.

Just as I was drifting off to sleep, Margaret grabbed my wrist. "I need to tell you something," she said. She turned on the light on her bedside table. "I saw Bennie with another woman."

"When?"

"A few weeks ago," she said. "When I was in Spokane seeing my sister. We went to Riverfront Park and I saw him holding hands with someone who wasn't Jane."

I sat up on my elbows. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"It's not against the law to cheat on your wife," Margaret said. "I saw something I wasn't supposed to see. I didn't want to compound the situation."

It was hard to argue the point. "Did he see you?"

"Oh," she said, "I'm sure he did. I screamed at him. I made a fool of myself right there in the middle of the park."

"What did he do?"

"He listened, politely," she said, "and then told me I wasn't half the woman Katherine was, to keep my own house in order, and to stop worrying about his."

"I see why you didn't tell me," I said. I'd have hurt him. That's the truth. Katherine had been his friend, but her name did not belong in his mouth. Twenty years she'd been dead and I still was ready to put someone's teeth in their throat for talking out of turn about her.

"I have no idea who that woman was," she said.

"She might be from over the hill. Could be they work together."

"I guess, I guess," Margaret said. "God. Morris. If not, how will she ever find out?"

"It made the national news," I said. "She'll figure it out." I reached across Margaret and turned off the light. "I need to close

my eyes for just a few minutes. If you think of anything else, I'm right here."

"It's not true, though, is it? About Katherine?"

"Bennie said it to be cruel," I said. "He was cornered. It was a shitty thing to say to you. But it's not true. Katherine would love anyone who managed to love me. And that includes you."

I kissed Margaret goodnight, and for a long time I just sat there in the darkness. In the shadows of my mind, I imagined my late wife overhearing this conversation from wherever her soul now lived and heard her rueful laugh so clearly it gave me a start. *This place is infected with evil*, I told her. *Well, you knew that, Morris. That's why you have the badge and gun*, she said. *Get some sleep*. And so I did, all through the night, something I would not do again for weeks.



WEDNESDAY MORNING, THE skies over Granite City were ice blue; the storm that had devastated the coastline, flooded most of the western portion of the state, and killed Bennie Toellner, swirled southeast, manifesting in northern California and central Idaho as little more than drops on a windshield. But here, it was everywhere, still: The broken window at Shake's Bar. The accordioned roof of the Texaco station on Route 9. A dozen split trees dangling onto Manzanita Drive...and one through the front window of Mel's Cosmic Comics.

"I almost spent the night in the shop," Melanie Cummings said. She was sweeping water out of the store when I arrived, just after nine, a bag filled with Kurt Toellner's D&D materials under my arm. Racks of comics had been destroyed. "But then the power cut out and the idea of sitting in the dark waiting for trouble seemed absurd."

"You made the right choice," I said.

"Well, I just hate to see these things get destroyed," she said. She motioned to a rack of soaked books. "Me, I've got insurance,

so I'll be fine. It's just, those comics, that's someone's work, you know? Gone." She brushed her bangs from her forehead then and I saw that she was teary eyed. "It's stupid. But see those couches over there?" There were three old couches in the far right corner of the store, a coffee table between them, all of it covered with chunks of water-logged acoustic ceiling panels that had fallen during the night. "After school, I've got kids sitting there all day. This is their spot. And now I don't know how long it will be before I can get some more couches, even."

"What do they do here all day?"

"Game, read, bullshit," she said. "Sometimes I'll order them a pizza."

"Out of your own pocket?"

"These kids," she said, "they just need someone who thinks they're cool." She sighed. "Anyway. What is it I can do for you on this shitty day, Sheriff?"

"I was hoping you could look at something for me." I unpacked the books and miniatures on her front counter. "You sell these?"

"Yeah," Melanie said. "I did." She picked up one of the books—*Wizards & Spells*—flipped it open, found a metallic sticker shoved between page 44 and 45, popped it out. "This is one of our security stickers." She looked over the miniatures. "All these are from here, too. Every single one. Whose are these?"

"Kurt Toellner," I said.

"Yeah, yeah," she said. She picked up the Paladin. It was painted orange and gold and silver, though the Paladin's hair was a shock of blood red. He held a long sword. "Man, he does a nice job on the painting and detail work. What's the problem? He paid for all of them, if that's what you're wondering. Nice kid. Bennie's been bringing him here forever."

"He came up missing yesterday," I said. "Was hoping maybe if he came in here, you might know who else he played with?"

“Kurt? Oh no. He’s like the mascot to a bunch of kids. Guy who runs their game,” she said, “he’s a little older. He must be a junior. Jason something. Wait a sec.” She went into the back, came out with a Granite City yearbook. “I buy an ad every year in this, mostly so if one of the kids shoplifts or something, I can identify them later.” She flipped through the pages, turned the book around. “Here you go. Jason Gerard.” I wrote his name down. Didn’t sound familiar. About 35,000 people lived in Granite City then, so I didn’t know everyone, but I knew most of them.

“New to town?”

“Been coming in for a year or so,” she said. “He put up a note on the bulletin board maybe six months ago saying he was looking to DM.”

“What does DM mean?”

“Dungeon Master,” she said. “I saw him in here with Kurt a couple times last few months. Nothing weird.”

I pulled out the maps. “What are these?”

“The aforementioned dungeons,” Melanie said. She held one up. “This is beautiful work. Kurt’s a real artist.”

“Where is this place?”

“It’s in Kurt’s head,” she said. When I didn’t respond, she said, “You ever been to a movie before, Sheriff?” I told her I was familiar with the concept. “These maps are like the map of an entire movie set. They play in it. It’s a visual tool for the kids to act out in. And Jason, he’s the director. Again, nothing weird.”

“Nothing weird about a seventeen-year-old hanging with a twelve-year-old? And he’s the dungeon master? All of that sounds weird, Melanie.”

“You need the context,” Melanie said. “Neither of these kids are exactly popular. It’s good they found each other.” A thought came to Melanie. “When you say he came up missing,” she said. “What does that mean?”

“He’s not been seen in a couple days.”

“Is there a reason to be concerned?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Jesus,” she said. “I’ve known Bennie forever. I’ll give him a call.”

“You haven’t heard,” I said.

“Heard what?”

I told her what I knew about Bennie, which at that point was scant beyond what had been reported, that his Coast Guard tug had been lost at sea, that all were presumed dead.

Melanie slumped against her counter. “My god,” she said. “Who saves the Coast Guard? It doesn’t make sense. None of this makes any sense.”

I took out my wallet, counted out all the cash I had in it, put it on the counter. It was about sixty bucks. “Toward the pizza fund,” I said.



JASON GERARD WAS in calculus when I got to Granite City High School, so the principal, Davy Hewiston, sent a kid to get him. Davy Hewiston had been principal going on five years already. He’d come down from Seattle after Loretta King died at her desk after thirty-five years of waking up at 5 a.m., going to every frozen football game, standing watch in the halls, and then spending a good two to four hours at Shake’s, bullshitting, chain-smoking, and drinking a single Maker’s and 7UP from a tall red glass she brought from home. We ended up spending a lot of time together, because in a town like Granite City, the sheriff and the high school principal end up eating a lot of pancake breakfasts together courtesy of the Lion’s Club.

Davy and I did not have the same relationship.

“What’s this about, Morris?” Davy asked. “Your cruiser out front already has half the city calling in to see if there’s been a drug bust.”

“I just have some questions for Jason about a kid he knows,” I said.

Davy shifted around in his seat. “Jason’s not yet eighteen,” he said. “Don’t you think you should get his parents’ consent?”

“He’s not a suspect in something,” I said. “And I don’t need anyone’s consent.”

“I know you don’t *need* it,” Davy said. “I’m talking about the polite thing. You know. Kid comes home and tells mom and dad Sheriff Drew came and talked to him, that ends up being my problem, not yours.”

“Take it up with the United States Constitution,” I said.

“You wanna give me a hint, then? So I don’t go into battle with a squirt gun?”

I looked out the window. There was a crew cleaning up debris from the quad, another was putting a plywood sheet in the library’s window. I’d gone to this very high school, over thirty years before. I’d gone straight from here to Korea, where I’d been a rifleman, and then eventually returned to Granite City, thinking it would be a life that made sense. It never was, it never would be. “A twelve-year-old was bludgeoned to death in his bed,” I said. “I think Jason might have been the last person to see him alive. Or maybe not. Maybe he’s the one who put the twelve-year-old’s brain matter on the ceiling. I guess I’m about to find out.”

“Brain matter?” He sounded stricken.

“Yeah,” I said. “You hit someone hard enough with a hammer and you do it enough times, well, you’re eventually gonna spatter their brains in a pretty defined pattern.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Davy Hewiston said. He grabbed a Kleenex, coughed into it, and then vomited right there on his desk. Mostly coffee. “Oh my god,” he said. “I don’t know what just happened.”

I got up, checked my shoes. All clear. “That’s your body’s way of saying: Don’t ask questions that you don’t want answers to, Davy. I’ll be outside. Get yourself together.”

I went out and waited for Jason Gerard in the breezeway between the administration building and the main hall. He came walking up a few minutes later and I understood immediately what Melanie had meant about the context. Jason Gerard's entire face was a series of caramel brown freckles. The freckles were so densely packed that his untouched skin looked like tiny shards of daylight up against the tableau of his long, thick black hair. That said, he wasn't a bad looking kid, but he carried himself with the countenance of a person who was waiting for bad news, so though he was almost six feet tall, he seemed somehow smaller, like he'd been cooked down. He had on jeans and a black T-shirt and a fleeced-lined denim jacket. He'd have to be dipped in wet cement to weigh 140 pounds.

We sat down at the same long metal picnic table I used to take all my meals at in 1950. There'd been a couple coats of paint put on in the intervening years, but if I looked closely, I'm sure I could find my own fingerprints on here somewhere.

I set Kurt's books and miniatures between us.

"You know why I'm here?" I said.

He picked up an elf with a long sword. Rolled it between his thumb and index finger. "I guess about Kurt and his dad."

"That's right," I said.

"I heard there were cops at John Glenn today," he said. "I figured someone would be coming by."

"When was the last time you saw Kurt?"

"Monday night," he said. "We did a pretty bad ass quest, honestly. Mr. Toellner played, too. It was hella fun."

"You like pretending to kill things?"

Jason laughed, but not in an altogether funny way. "Did you watch the *60 Minutes*?"

"Heard about it."

"You worried me and Kurt were conjuring Satan?"

“Not personally,” I said. “But others will eventually. I’m just being honest with you.”

“That’s not what D&D is about. It’s more about, like, hanging out and using your imagination. It’s cool, seeing where your mind can take you. So for me, as a DM? I get to make up stories, get to imagine how people will react in certain situations. But in the end, I’m in control, you know, but only to the extent of my own ability to come up with stuff? But then, like, in the game itself? You’re with people. Doing things. Helping each other. Casting spells and killing things, that’s like part of it, but it’s not why you play. It’s not why I play, anyway.”

“Mr. Toellner often play with you two?”

Jason shrugged. “He was into whatever Kurt was into. He was cool as shit.”

“He was,” I said.

“You know him?”

“Since I was your age.”

“He was pretty fucked up about his wife boning out.”

“Yeah,” I said. “That makes sense.” I examined Jason’s hands for scratches, marks, anything that might tell me he’d been in a fight. Other than a hangnail on his right thumb, Jason Gerard had the softest looking hands I’d ever seen. If he was to swing a sledgehammer, it would rip his palm apart. “What time did you leave Monday night?”

“Mr. Toellner drove me home Tuesday morning, actually,” Jason said.

“You spent the night?”

“Yeah, he drove me home on his way to work. Basically I babysat Kurt on Monday after school and then just stayed over. I did that sometimes.”

“Your parents don’t mind?”

“I live with my mom’s brother Frankie. You probably know him. He owns the bowling alley.”

“Frankie Loomis?”

“That’s right.”

Frankie Loomis did in fact own the bowling alley out near the county line. It wasn’t a bad place to knock down some pins, provided you also drove a Harley and dealt a little trucker speed.

“You okay out there?” I asked.

He shrugged. “It’s temporary. My dad’s doing a stint in Walla Walla. My mom thought it would be better if I came and stayed here while she tried to make some money up in Alaska.” Walla Walla was where the state penitentiary was located. “Finding the Toellners made things easier. And Frankie’s all right. To me, anyway. Makes sure I have what I need.”

“When do you turn eighteen?”

“Three weeks.”

“Then what?”

“I guess college, then law school, then wife, then gold dog, then I’ll retire and die on my bed of money.”

“You got it figured out,” I said.

Principal Hewiston walked out then. I gave him a wave. The kind that says this isn’t his problem and he should go back to his shitty little office.

“I’ll be out of this place fast,” Jason said eventually. “You can bet on that.”

“So,” I said, “clear something up. Were you friends with Bennie or Kurt?”

“I guess sort of both. Kurt was way into D&D and I guess I was too, but then I just sort of liked hanging out over there. Mrs. Toellner was hella nice, too.” He took out a Kleenex and blew his nose. “They knew I could use the money, so they were real pleasant to me, often asked me to watch Kurt if they were going out, which was never a trouble, because Kurt, he’s a cool kid.” He shook his head. “You think they’ll find Mr. Toellner?”

“No,” I said.

“I heard they found blood in the house.”

“Where’d you hear that?”

“Mr. Foder? The shop teacher? He has a police scanner,” Jason said.

“What time did Bennie drive you home?”

“Early,” he said. “Woke me at 6.”

“You see Kurt in the morning?”

“No, I fell asleep on the sofa watching TV. Kurt was pretty sick. Kept throwing up all day. So Bennie said he was going to stay home with him. Guess he changed his mind.”

“He probably got called in,” I said. I’d need to check that. But I was beginning to get a sick feeling in my stomach. “Kurt ever say anything about his father? Was he...touching him or anything?”

“No, man. No.” He thought for a moment. “I mean, not around me. They seemed to really care about each other. Better than my dad treated me. Mrs. Toellner was like the third wheel, if anything.” A bell rang and kids started coming out of classrooms. Jason picked up another miniature. A fire breathing dragon. “Can I take this one? This one was my favorite.”

“Sure,” I said.

Jason brushed the hair from his eyes. “So Kurt’s dead?”

“I think so,” I said. “We’ve got people looking for his body. You can help after school. We’ve got people meeting out by Casper’s Burgers.”

“And his dad?”

I pointed up at a helicopter overhead. “They’ll keep looking for a bit,” I said. “But he’s dead, Jason. I’m real sorry.”

Tears filled Jason’s eyes. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do,” he said.

“Try and be happy that you’re alive.”

“If I cut,” he said, “you’re not gonna arrest me for truancy, are you?”

“Not today.”

Jason nodded. He picked up another figure. “This was Mrs. Toellner’s favorite. Some kind of high priestess. Kurt used to leave this in like the fridge and shit. Bury it in the mayo or the butter or whatever. It was kind of a joke between them.” He handed it to me. “Maybe make sure she gets it.”

I told him I would.

Kids walking by stopped to stare at us. They didn’t even bother to pretend they were looking at something else.

“You’re not making my life easier,” Jason said.

“Three weeks,” I said. “You’ll be out of here. Take the GED, though, don’t just walk out.”

“You think Mr. Toellner hurt Kurt?”

“I’m trying not to think that way,” I said. “But if not, it was you or a stranger who showed up out of the woods.”

“It wasn’t me,” Jason said.

“I know,” I said.

“When I walked up,” he said, “you looked like you thought it might be me.”

I picked up the miniature Melanie had pointed out earlier—the Paladin with blood red hair and the long sword—and touched my thumb to the tip of the sword. It was sharp. If I pressed, it would draw blood. “When I was a kid, younger than you,” I said, “I didn’t play with Army men. We didn’t have anything like this stuff. Nothing even close. By the time I was your age, I already knew that I wanted to kill someone.” I set the Paladin down, picked up a female miniature that was absurdly proportioned and nearly nude. “What’s this character called?”

“She’s a ranger,” Jason said. He watched me closely.

“She’ll freeze to death before she gets anywhere.” I set her back down. “So when I turned eighteen, I enlisted in the Army. I was so angry by then. If you looked at me wrong, I would hurt you. That’s the kinda guy I was. Two beers and I’d put your eyes out. And then I

got my chance in Korea. And I got good at it. I got what you would call proficient at my job.”

“That’s not me,” he said. “Beer makes me sick.”

“I know it isn’t,” I said. “It’s not me much anymore, either, unless I need it. I tell you this because if I thought you’d killed Kurt, you’d already be dead. Because I loved that boy, understand? Maybe Bennie wanted me to find what I found. Maybe he wanted me to find you, eventually.”

“You think that?”

“I don’t know. I’m working through some things.” I examined the Paladin again. You could see the minute brush strokes Kurt had made. He’d even painted the eyes so they had an ethereal glow to them. The hours he must have spent. “The people in this town,” I said, “they may look at you like you did something wrong. But I know, okay? I know. And I’ll do what I can to protect you. But you’re gonna get called in on this. Your fingerprints and hair will be everywhere in that house. State guys may take a run at you, too. We’ll get you a lawyer, all that. Just be honest and communicative and this will pass, eventually.”

“My uncle is going to trip,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Listen. He has anything...problematic in the house? Tell him to get rid of it. Guns, drugs, whatever. No need to bring some heat on himself in this.” I reached into my pocket and found one of my cards, gave it to him. “Frankie has a problem, tell him to call me, alright? You, too.”

Another bell rang. “I better get going,” he said and stood up. “What are you going to do with all this stuff?”

“Keep it as evidence for a bit, then turn it over to Jane.”

“If she doesn’t want anything, tell her to let me know. Me and Kurt, we painted most of these together.”

I told him I would. He’d started to walk away when a thought came to me. “You happen to know if Deena Vlach is here today?”

"I haven't seen her in a week," he said.

"Really?"

"Yeah, I heard she broke her leg skiing down in Tahoe or something," he said. "It's why I ended up babysitting Kurt. Monday nights, I usually do inventory with my uncle, but Bennie called in a panic. She might even still be gone."

Shit. I'd left a message for her yesterday, too. If he'd known she was out of town Monday, wouldn't he have known she was out of town Tuesday?

"Why?" Jason asked.

"It's nothing," I said. "Just running down people who'd interacted with the family." I put my hand out and Jason Gerard shook it. "Keep your head down. Okay?" He said he would. A few seconds later he was gone, enveloped in the mass of kids heading to class. Over the years, I'd see Jason now and again, usually out by the bowling alley where he ended up working for his uncle until Frankie got a nickel for dealing speed, and once, many years later, in the front seat of a Mustang that had smashed headlong into a semi, plunging him, ironically, and tragically, into Patterson Gulch.



THE SEARCH FOR Kurt Toellner's body lasted, in earnest, for three weeks, and then petered into nothing but posters on light poles as winter turned to spring. Jane Toellner moved back into her house for a few months and then, as May became June, put it on the market in hopes of getting some tourist to fall in love with it. Because one thing was certain, no local was stepping foot in that house or on that land. Not any time soon, anyway.

Though what we knew for certain by then was little more than we knew the day after it all happened, the unknown was quantifiably worse, amplified as it was over those next months and years by rumor and innuendo and, eventually, an episode of one of those late-night

forensics shows found down low on the cable listings. Because while the blood and brain matter in Kurt's bed were indeed Kurt's, a search of the house found more disturbing things than we could account for: luminol tests revealed significant blood stains in the master bedroom, the garage, and underneath where the couch was in the living room. We found traces of hair and blood in the bathtub that didn't belong to anyone we could discern. Jane let us dig up the backyard, the front yard, the side yard, and wherever a dog seemed to find something worthwhile on the property.

But there was nothing.

We even drained Nel's Pond and discovered nothing but trout, broken fishing poles, a thousand condoms, and three guitars.

There weren't even any missing persons in Granite City at the time, other than Bennie and Kurt Toellner.

So it was that I drove over to the house on a blistering June day with a bag of Kurt's Dungeons & Dragons books, maps, and miniatures. I found Jane out back, planting roses, surrounded by bags of potting soil and fertilizer.

"Those look pretty," I said.

Jane jumped with a start. "You scared the shit out of me, Morris," she said.

"Sorry," I said, "thought you heard me pull up."

Jane pulled off her gardening gloves, dropped them on the grass. "I've been getting a lot of kids driving up, mostly at night, presumably to view the haunted house," she said. "I've taken to ignoring the sounds of cars."

"You want," I said, "I can put one of my guys on the road for a few weeks."

"It's fine," she said. "I won't be here much longer." She took the bag from me, looked in. "This all of it?"

"Yeah," I said. "I gave one of the miniatures to Jason Gerard a couple months ago."

“That was nice of you.”

“He’s going through it,” I said.

“Do you want to go inside?” she asked. “I can see if we have any coffee. I don’t drink it anymore. I have a hard enough time falling asleep.”

“No,” I said.

“No,” she said. “I suppose not.” I followed Jane over to the small patio off the back door, where she had a little table, mostly to hold an overflowing ashtray, surrounded by two white plastic chairs.

“When did you start smoking?” I asked.

“You don’t remember?” she said. “Katherine and I used to steal my mother’s cigarettes all the time.”

“Marlboros?”

“See, you have a good memory after all,” she said. “I see her sometimes, you know.”

“Katherine?” She’d been dead over twenty years by then.

“Sure,” she said. “More lately. I swore she was beside me in Fleenor’s the other day. I was talking to her in my head about everything and just pushing my cart down the aisle and for a moment, I was positive I saw her, just out of the corner of my eye. Does that ever happen to you?”

“Yes.”

“I guess it’s just our brains trying to make sense of things that make no sense. Chaos looking for order. I’ve been waiting for Bennie or Kurt to show up, but no luck. It makes me wonder if they’re really dead.”

“They are,” I said.

Jane nodded. “You’re a practical man,” she said. “I guess I could learn something from you. Less magical thinking would probably be good for me, in the long run.” She took the ashtray and dumped the contents into a bush, then opened up the bag of Kurt’s belongings and spread out the contents on the little table. “They spent more time playing this dumb game and painting these toys together than they

ever spent with me. I hate this stupid shit, I really do.” She flipped through one of the books. “Warlocks and wood nymphs and maidens and faeries. Neither of them content to live in the real world.” She slapped the book against the table.

“I need to ask you a question,” I said. I reached out and took the book from her hands. “For me. Just for me. Off the record.”

“Nothing is off the record,” Jane said. “I’ve answered every question a thousand times, from cops, from attorneys, from the fucking news. It’s my infinity.”

“Why did you leave? Really?”

“I didn’t love him. It’s as simple as that. I told him I had a flight and instead just moved to my mother’s. Simple as that.”

“Why didn’t you take Kurt?”

“He wouldn’t have come, that much I knew,” she said. “And now I wonder what he and Bennie were doing in this house when I wasn’t here. I can’t imagine. I can’t even begin to imagine.” She paused. “Do you think Bennie crashed his boat?”

“I do.”

She nodded again. “He was never violent to me. I never saw anything strange. I just didn’t love him. I had the sense he was probably cheating on me, probably with someone in the Guard, no one local, and so I honestly thought I was doing him a favor by being the one to leave. Because he would have just stayed here, mired in his passivity, until we both got old. I just knew that. And I didn’t want that life.”

“Margaret saw him with someone in Spokane,” I said.

Jane looked mildly surprised. “When?”

“About a month before this all happened,” I said. “We haven’t identified who she was. No one came forward.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Jane said.

“I suppose not,” I said.

We sat there in silence for a few moments before Jane finally said, “Just say it, Morris. I can see it devouring you.”

“Was it you?” I said. “Did you do it?”

“No,” she said. “Is that better? Do you believe me?”

“No,” I said, “it’s not better.”

“There’s not always a why,” Jane said. “That’s what my mother used to tell me about things I didn’t understand. Why is the sky blue? Why is water wet? Why is God invisible?”

“Two out of three of those have answers,” I said.

“You know what I mean,” she said. She got up then, brushed herself off. “Help me get some bags of soil out of my trunk and then go home to your wife and have a good life, Morris. Don’t think about me or this horribleness anymore. It’s done. There’s no why anymore that any of us can possibly figure out.”

She was probably right.

I followed her to the garage, where her Honda Accord was parked. She popped the trunk and I grabbed up two big twenty-five-pound bags, put them over my shoulder, and then, as Jane began to close the trunk, I saw—along with a hand shovel, shears, and a small rake, plus the normal detritus of bags, old sweaters, and receipts—a sledgehammer.