

CHAPTER 1



The family of Lovecraft had long been settled in Dunham County. Their property was modest, and their residence was known about the region as Lovecraft Cottage, nestled against Mill Road and at the site of the Huntsman's Oak where, for many generations, they had lived in so respectable a manner as to engage the general good opinion of their surrounding acquaintance. The property abutted the sprawling parkland of Northwich Hall to the west, and to the north stretched a deep, primal coniferous forest that carpeted the wild foothills where few men had cause to go, so by its placement, Lovecraft Cottage was quiet and secluded, which suited the family quite amicably. Mr. Henry Phineas Lovecraft, the legal inheritor of the cottage, had spent his younger years as a professor of history in London's Chambers College, but a series of successful business ventures had left him with wealth to spare, so he retired to write memoirs and raise a family in his ancestral home, and his retreat to Dunham County had proven to be comfortably spent. He married a young Dunham woman of the Bierce lineage, and their relationship proceeded not merely from interest, but from goodness of heart, and she gave him every degree of solid comfort which his age could

receive. Together they brought forth four daughters into the world, and the cheerfulness of his children added a relish to his existence.

I, as the eldest of his daughters, had cherished his company and wisdom for all my twenty-six years, and the love I felt for both my parents was not only of obedience and respect, but also of good-humour and friendship. They strived to keep a pleasing home full of good books and lively music, a convivial fortress from which we could glean strength. Of course, the events which were to transpire in fair pastoral Dunham were of such a gruesome nature that, after their conclusion and upon reflection, my dear father felt fortunate to have built this serene oasis. Truly, he must possess a remarkable foresight to have sensed such dark times were coming; after all, queer talents ran in the Lovecraft line, and if he possessed the gift of precognition, it would come of no great surprise to anyone. Long afterwards, and as an elderly man, he often reminisced that, without this refuge, he might have despaired at the future of humanity and lost all hope completely.

Lovecraft Cottage is a small, two-story building of white plaster and grey stone, surrounded by abundant vegetable gardens, four large bee hives, and an unassuming frog pond. While it provided for all our earthly needs, and would be judged a respectable domicile by most standards, the cottage paled in comparison to its neighbour to the west, Northwich Hall. Throughout the entire county, Northwich Hall was considered to be the most glorious example of architecture, and a house fit for a gentleman of only the finest breeding. Therefore, while Lovecraft Cottage was in actuality quite comfortable and spacious, it had the misfortune of appearing homely and cramped by virtue of its location. My father did not let this dampen his enthusiasm, but he often peeked over the ancient stone wall that divided the land to gaze across the mile of open parkland at the great estate. Whenever I witnessed Papa in his solitude, staring across the fields to that enchanting prospect long lain empty, I could almost read his thoughts upon his face: he marvelled that the Hall was lonesome and dreary, when only a scant distance away, his own home bustled with the chatter and laughter of young women. How could one small

house be so spirited, when its regal neighbour remained so derelict and sad?

Therefore, when I heard a rumour from the elder Mrs. Runkle that Northwich Hall had been sold, I hurried immediately home from the village to inform my father that there were soon to be people living in the mansion. I hoped that the news might bring him good cheer. Northwich Hall had sat empty for nearly a generation, and the prospect of a new family - lighting candles in the dark and moody windows, hosting dances and parties for the ladies of the county, perhaps a wife or daughter seeking the companionship of new friends - filled my heart with giddy anticipation. For almost the entirety of my life, I had gazed out my bedroom window at the solemn, cold and closed building, at the rolling lawns peppered with cherry trees, and wondered if anyone would ever be brave enough to adopt such a magnificent project as reviving the neglected house, thereby transforming it from a gothic ruin into a majestic palace.

The manor's turrets and facade were somewhat Georgian at first glance, but grew ever more exotic the longer one studied its ornaments. The stones had been hewn of a granite so dark, it appeared to my eyes as a mottled black in foul weather and a stern grey in summer, yet the great estate was happily situated amongst rolling woody hills, and contained a natural stream made beautiful without manufactured adornments, fringed with abundant herbage. This jubilant brook circled the western perimeter of the property and terminated in a large, circular pond well-stocked with trout. In my earliest childhood memories, I recalled that the pond had been garnished by a pair of black swans, but when the previous inhabitants had left their great residence, so too had the waterfowl. Its expanse of open parkland was roughly square, and from the south, a gravel drive connected the house with the Green Track, and from thence to Dunham Village. This lane, bounded by parallel lines of swaying elms, skirted the edge of the trout pond and continued past the sprawling gardens, then ducked under a stone palisade that sheltered the main entrance. Here, broad steps lead up to double oak doors that had been locked and bolted for decades.

While the grounds and house were not as large as Delphne Manor in Upper Whatley, it was also not as garish or bold, and retained an august distinction that Delphne Manor had lost when its occupants -- the Wendsley-Waughes, a frivolous and inbred lineage of questionable sensibilities -- had strung filament bulbs hither and yon. In my opinion, Northwich Hall enjoyed a classic, restrained beauty that hinted at secrets and intrigues, and that suited my tastes much better.

My father, when I found him in the garden and told him the news, cocked one hoary eyebrow in tempered interest. "As wonderful as that might be, I shall not get my hopes up, and nor should you, Harry," he warned, "It's my understanding that Northwich Hall is never to be inhabited again."

I laughed, thinking this to be bit of hyperbole. "And what a waste of a perfectly good house that would be!" I replied, continuing inside to inform my mother. I found her sitting in the front parlour, mending stockings, as our housemaid Beatrice bustled about the kitchen, preparing tea. A small fire crackled in the hearth. The windows were tightly sealed against the spring damp. The parlour possessed a stuffy air that made one's nose itch.

Mama showed none of the hopefulness nor fascination that I had felt when confronted with such gladsome news. As I have previously mentioned, she is of the Bierce lineage; they are a stubborn bloodline, if occasionally given to bouts of obsession and, when matters do not conform to their desires, downright curmudgeonliness.

"Oh, posh, Mrs. Runkle said so!" she teased, and pinched my ear in a method that, while fond, left a sting. My mother never intends to be cruel, but she can be enthusiastic to the point of belligerence, and often assumes all people must feel as she does on a subject. As a younger woman, she had been described as headstrong and determined, but in her middle years, those same qualities could be interpreted as bullish, and when my mother got an idea in her head, she became an unstoppable force. Woe be to anyone who stood in her way!

"Why would the postmistress lie about such a thing?" I said.

Mama set her mending down in a huff. "You mustn't believe a

word of it, Harriet!" she scolded, "I heard tell from Mrs. Poole that Mrs. Runkle has grown dotty over the course of the last six months, and we must take everything she claims with a generous heap of salt!" She picked up the stockings, shaking her head in dismissal so violently that her grey curls and frilly lace mob-cap danced. "I sincerely doubt anyone would purchase Northwich. It's far too much work for the investment. No, my sweet, Mrs. Runkle can't tell her elbow from her knee! I suspect she's remembering the last family to inhabit Northwich Hall, and thinking herself back twenty years or more."

I settled in the opposite chair. "You mean, the Poseys."

Mama looked over her demi-glasses. Her mood curdled.

"That is a name we dare not speak, my sweet."

I let the statement hang in the air between us, and as Mama reclined and settled back to her mending, I selected my next words with great care. "I know we must not mention them, but..."

"Tsk!" She jabbed one finger into the air. "Not a word!"

We sat in uncomfortable silence as the fire popped and crackled. At last, I could bear it no longer. I stood and began to climb the stairs, but Mama would not let it go.

"Not a word, Harriet!" she called up after me. "Not one single word!"

I plodded up the steps and made her no promise. On sunnier days, my three sisters preferred reading in the garden, but with a damp spring drizzle covering the land, I knew I'd find them in the library at the top of the stairs. It had a large window overlooking the Mill Road that, in the afternoon, provided a good, strong light. As predicted, Jane sat at the drawing table with paper and pencils, Mary rested on the couch where she was stitching together a quilt, while Emma's nose was firmly planted in an old volume of plates, which from a glance at its illustrations, explored the idiosyncrasies of light and lenses.

I'd recently passed my threshold for a marriageable age, but Jane was two years younger, and so Mama still held hope of finding her a decent husband. Jane was a sweet, steady, ever-hopeful girl, and possessed an elegant bearing and respectable manner. Her face was

heart-shaped with delicate cheekbones that supported a pair of lively, wide grey eyes, and her hair was the colour of autumn leaves -- a vibrant gold shot through with red -- that looked especially striking against her flawless complexion. As a result of these natural endowments, Jane enjoyed the gaze of many young men, but most were too flummoxed by her beauty to engage her in deep conversations, and this was a pity, for she had a quick mind to match her fair face.

All was not perfection, of course. Like any young woman, Jane could be swept away by her fancies, but in my sister's case, that was doubly dangerous, for she had an unusual talent for manipulations. If Jane had been smitten by any fellow in Dunham, he'd quickly find himself ensnared in her charms like a fly in a spider's web. So far, none of the villagers had lost their capabilities for rational thought or for free will; I'm sure this was due, not to Jane's benevolence, but to her finding the neighbouring boys too dull to suit her tastes.

As if created to balance Jane's delicate sentimentalism, my next youngest sister, Mary, was a rational creature, forever inclined to logical thinking. She was a scientist in all things, and she carefully considered the natural philosophies and their influences on her work. Her choices were measured. She found comfort in order and facts. Her appearance reflected her meticulous character: every black hair was carefully pinned in place, every braid tightly woven, every pleat of her dress as straight as an arrow. Even now, sewing her quilt, she worked with boundless care and attention to detail, with each stitch wrought the same length and distance as its fellows. She had no great passion for quilting, but it was the only way she could create a blanket that was long enough to cover her from head to toe, and she took pride in her work, even if there was no love to fuel it.

Just as her external form was deliberately crafted, so too must be her internal processes, for Mary's memory was legendary; it did little good to argue with her, for if she'd read a snippet of trivia once, it never left her.

And she was generous with her gifts. Mary spent her days teaching singing to the village children, leading the village choir, composing music on piano or violin, and collecting a compendium of folk tunes.

Her singing was legendary. Such was the power and beauty of her voice that, when Mary sang, the whole world bent its ear to listen. Her notes carried pure and clear with perfect pitch and a powerful volume, and this was unsurprising, for she must have possessed extremely large lungs. After all, Mary was over six-and-a-half feet tall, larger than Papa by a head, with broad plough-board hands and oxen shoulders.

I glanced over her arm to examine her work.

"Very pretty," I said.

Mary barely broke her concentration long enough to say thank you.

"She's going to go blind, sewing such tiny stitches," Emma warned. "Mary, rest your eyes, or you'll give yourself a headache by suppertime!"

Oh, Emma! As the youngest of the Lovecraft girls at eighteen years of age, she could be timid and prone to distraction, but there contained a kindness and archness to her bearing that made it difficult for any person to think poorly of her, and by her character, Emma was the most fun, given to spritely flights of play. She was neither a beauty, like Jane, nor highly intelligent, like Mary, and her lack of confidence in both of these extremes had made her unsure of her place in the world. To make matters worse, all three of her older sisters were unmarried, and that left her to be a very poor prospect, with little hope of securing a good match. Because of our failures to enter into matrimony, she could see only a future like my own, as an impoverished spinster with no romance to sweeten her days.

Emma, small and bird-boned, possessed an unruly mop of curly red hair and an aspect of the fairy folk about her appearance. She could be dreamy and imaginative -- sometimes too much so -- and she could be lost for days in her tinkering and her inventions, yet for any of her detriments, I loved Emma with all my heart. Her eyes sparkled, her manners were honest, her heart bent towards the fabulous. She endeavoured to follow the latest fashions, but it was difficult in our secluded hamlet to know the trends, so her frocks were often an artistic interpretation that reflected her love of colour and whimsy

and ruffles. Emma and I had bound ourselves together as we watched Jane and Mary accomplish so much with ease, and we supported each other as we struggled to hone the same attractive qualities that they came by naturally.

Of course, Emma had her own supernatural talents that set her apart from the rabble, and I think in many ways, she was the most affected by the series of events that were to happen in Dunham County. She was very nurturing, very caring, and she took deeply to heart the struggles and pains of another; the root of Emma's Quirk lay in her empathy and deep compassion. Our Quirks remained ephemeral to the discerning eye, but hers produced measurable results, for the sting of a cut or a bruise would soften under the touch of Emma's healing fingers. While Mama remained uncertain of the morality of our abilities, she encouraged Emma to exercise her talents whenever possible, and even congratulated my youngest sister on her fine work. None of the rest of us were ever so openly celebrated.

Emma set her book in her lap. She glanced at the base of my throat, where a tiny iron latchkey hung on a silver necklace, and said, "How was the library today?"

"Only one visitor," I replied, "Jerold Chowder brought a donation of novels, most in poor condition. He didn't stay long."

"I think he's still fond of you," said Jane.

Inwardly, I cringed, for I knew the reverse to be true, but outwardly I smiled. "Oh, I think not."

Mary looked up from her sewing. "Is there any news from the village?"

I took a seat on the couch by the far window and gazed out towards the road, toying with the library key. Feigning a bored voice, I said, "No, not really... Mr. Rabbit has caught a cold. Mrs. Winterbottom and old Mrs. Tippler are hosting a tea on Friday. Oh, yes, and one more thing... someone has bought Northwich Hall."

To my satisfaction, all three of my sisters perked up, and like a triad of owls, they all asked, "Who?"

"Who?!"

"Who?!?"

I laughed. "Mrs. Runkle didn't provide any names," I replied.

"They must have great ambitions," Emma said in a reverent hush.

"Or great fortunes," said Jane. "Can you imagine the income it will require to restore the place? Just taming the gardens will take a small army!"

Mary set aside her needles and thread. "It may have been purchased, but that doesn't mean it will be inhabited. It could simply be an investment."

"Wouldn't it be wonderful for it to be a home again?" I said. "I've always loved Northwich Hall. It has such a mysterious aura!"

"There's no mystery," said Mary, ever rational, "It's only old, ruined, and dirty."

"I think it's positively spooky!" said Emma.

I liked how my youngest sister's eyes gleamed. "Precisely!" I dropped my voice to a whisper. "And with the fate of the poor Posey family, to cast such a dreadful pall over its history..."

Jane scoffed at us both. "Be quiet, both of you."

"You mustn't speak of it," said Mary.

And of course, that's all that was required for Emma to lean in close, eyes afire. "Why? What? What mustn't we speak about?"

Mary glowered at me, for letting loose the tantalizing hint of a rumour in front of our most-curious sister. "The Poseys, the last family to live in Northwich Hall. You've heard their name, no doubt."

"Only in passing," Emma said, "No one ever tells me anything!"

"Well, it was a long time ago and best forgotten," Mary decreed, but I did not concur.

"The incident happened before you were born," I said, "I was only five, and Jane was three, and Mary was not yet here at all."

"Mama has said we're not to gossip," Mary warned, "Foolish superstitious nonsense!"

But Jane, suitably inspired by Emma's infectious interest, chose to ignore Mary and turned to me. "I do remember bits, but like a dream," she said as she sat beside me on the couch, smoothing down her skirts. "I don't know if I can trust my recollections."

"See?" Mary continued, returning to her stitches, "All of it, nonsense."

"You're no fun," I said, "Go on, Jane. What do you remember?"

Jane closed her eyes. "Well, the Posey family lived in Northwich Hall then, and Mr. Posey was said to be related to royalty, although I'm not sure on the lineage. He was a crabby old fellow, and Mrs. Posey was of middling age and in good health, but frightfully ugly, with great ungainly mule teeth and wild, scrubby black hair. I don't think they had much fondness for each other; he liked her only for her ability to give him three sons, and she liked him solely for his fortune."

"You can't possibly know that," Mary said, "You were only three!"

"I know this from later conversations with Papa," Jane replied. "He's not so afraid to speak of the incident, if you catch him in the right mood."

I took up the tale. "It was summer, I remember, because the Huntsman's Oak was in full leaf, and so was the elm in the garden, and the view from my room was partially obscured. The hour was very late, with only a half-moon to light the meadows, when a ferocious knocking came upon the kitchen door. Papa opened it to find Mr. Posey. His trousers were torn to shreds and his hair was uncombed, mud caked his face and hands. He claimed that the Devil had come to Dunham County, and eaten his children up, and whisked his wife away on the back of a fearsome black billy-goat."

Emma's blue eyes were as wide as coins.

Mary took her opportunity, and reached over to pinch Emma's ear, and our youngest sister yelped in terror.

As we laughed, Emma thumped Mary on the shoulder, as effective as a kitten swatting a lion.

I took up the tale. "Papa and some of the men from the village went up to the house. They found the whole place in disarray, but no sign of Mrs. Posey or her sons. All four had vanished from the face of the earth and were never seen from again."

"What about Mr. Posey?"

"Bundled off to Broadmoor Asylum, I'm afraid, ranting about the Devil all the way," said Jane. "Poor fellow. I heard he hung himself."

"I heard he poisoned himself," said Mary.

"No, no," I replied, "He sliced off his own head with a carving knife."

Emma gave a little squeak of horror. "I don't care how he died, it's all positively ghoulish!"

"Well, it's certainly not a topic for polite conversation," said Mary. "I'd rather not dwell on the particulars."

"It's terribly sad, perhaps it's best not to talk about it." Emma agreed.

Jane lifted her pencil again. "Then I, for one, shall respect Mama's wishes fully," she said as she returned to her drawing. She could be frightfully sanctimonious, that one.

But I reclined against the arm of the couch and glanced out the window. "I can think of nothing more interesting to talk about," I admitted, "I'd like to know what happened to Mrs. Posey and her boys. Surely there must be some hint or clue -- "

"Finally," said Mary, "A lick of sense amongst the three of you."

-- some clue if the Devil whisks you off to Hell. You'd leave fingernail scratches in the floor, at the very least."

Mary sighed, rolled her eyes, and under her breath, muttered, "Codswallop."

"Maybe it is codswallop," said Jane, "I mean, how could one even slice off their own head? I don't think that's possible, is it?"

Emma lowered her book. "I'm happy I never knew that story before now. Is that why no one but us ever visits the grounds of Northwich Hall on their rambles? I don't think I would've enjoyed our visits half as much if I'd known the house has such an awful legacy." She glanced at me. "Now that you've told me, it feels less spooky, and more sad. What a horrible history... perhaps Mrs. Posey still haunts the place."

"Honestly," said Mary, putting her quilt aside. "The three of you would scare yourselves silly, given half a chance! No better than a bunch

of schoolgirls!" She affixed us with a stern glare. "There's no phantoms in Northwich Hall. It's only a dilapidated building with a tragic history, nothing more. And I applaud whomever has purchased the place! They'll give it a new story, and inject a bit of life into your haunted ruins."

"Our walks won't be the same, knowing someone is living on the grounds," I said. "The new owners will arrive and change the whole place to suit themselves, and it will lose all its enchantment. They could even withdraw access rights and keep the public from roaming on their land, if it suits them."

"They wouldn't dare!" said Emma, scandalized.

"They might," Jane replied. "It would be highly unusual, but not impossible."

"We ought to visit this afternoon, before they come and change it all," I said.

Outside the window, the drizzle had stopped. The clouds parted, and the sun shone a little brighter. "There, see?" Emma said with an eager grin, "The weather clears just for us!"

Mary grumbled, setting her sewing basket aside. "Fine, let's go, if only to stop you three from spinning mad tales and giving each other nightmares."

Thus, we found ourselves taking our afternoon stroll eastward, across the rolling greens and towards the imposing mansion, with its Gothic facade that grew only greyer and gloomier as we drew near. This was a walk we often took, through the overgrown gardens and along the weedy paths that circled the murky, slimy trout pond, but normally we gave the main house with its black windows a generously wide berth. Today, however, we wandered into its shadow, emboldened by the idea that this now all belonged to a stranger. The house looked the same -- dour, silent and brooding -- yet it would soon be bright and gay with occupation, and this abstract potential imbued it with a spirit that was slightly more convivial than in days past. It was no longer dejected and forgotten, but poised on the exciting edge of an unknown future. I was seized by a fierce curiosity, and my heart bursting with sudden courage, I sprinted up the wide

stone steps to peer with cupped hands through the leaded glass on either side of the main doors.

"Harry," Emma scolded, "Get back here!"

"What do you see?"

"It's very dark inside," I said to Jane, "I can't see much at all."

Emma looked around and said, "Can't you feel that?"

And yes, I could: the cool sensation of eyes upon us, a trembling sense of anticipation that started in the pelvis and skittered up the spine.

"It's nothing," Mary dismissed very quickly, which only served to show that she could feel it, too. "We ought to go."

Jane, standing farthest back in the driveway, gave a small gasp. "A curtain moved," she said, and pointed to the second story windows. "Someone is already here!"

And as she said these very words, the latch on the double doors clacked, and one swung open on squealing hinges.

All four of us snapped our attention towards the yawning entrance.

Yet no one stood inside.

The maw of the dim, unlit hall stretched before me, beckoning me. My pulse quickened and I took a single step back, suddenly afraid. A glance over my shoulder to my sisters proved that they were just as hesitant as me. Emma had sought shelter behind Mary, and Jane had retreated almost as far as the trout pond. I took a deep breath and called inside,

"Hello?"

The sound of my voice echoed back from the cavernous beyond.

"Come, Harry," said Emma, fretful, "We mustn't trespass in the house!"

"We can't leave the door open, either," I said, "That would invite all manner of creatures inside! The new owner would be very displeased to find a family of hedgehogs nesting in the cupboard, don't you think?"

I pushed it open and peeked inside, taking a step across the threshold.

"Then you ought to CLOSE the door instead of wandering inside, don't you think?" Mary insisted.

"Harry, this is very poor form," hissed Jane from around Mary's elbow. "Close the door and come along."

"Hello?" I said again to the empty lobby.

As my eyes adjusted to the gloom, I began to see shapes and colours of opulence: carved furniture from an older age, with wooden faces carved into the backs of chairs and braided ivy adorning the table legs. There were matching alabaster end tables, and on the walls hung colourful tapestries depicting Greek reveries. I spied paintings, too, of Arthurian kings dressed in golden finery holding court. Directly in front of the main door, the grand central staircase ascended to a landing against the west wall, then divided into two sweeping circular stairs that curved around to the north and south, with balustrades gilded in a soft, lustrous gold. Above the landing hung a portrait of a beautiful woman wearing a shepherd's chiton, surrounded by frolicking lambs in an idyllic Arcadian meadow. A massive chandelier of gilded branches hung from the vaulted ceiling, but its countless white candles were unlit, and the shadows that pooled around the furniture were inky and fathomless. Only the light from the door and the leaded windows percolated inside, bouncing off the white marble floor and glinting from gold and crystal.

Goodness! I'd expected the house to be empty of furniture and the floor covered with a carpet of dust, but instead I found Aladdin's cave! Every item was decadent and marvellous, breathtaking and expensive, of a quality befitting a fairytale castle. I drank in my surroundings, my breath in my throat, my mouth slack with wonder. Imagine a vast museum of priceless treasures appearing next door, inviting you to explore its secrets!

How could I resist? I took another step inside.

Directly to my right, a granite arch led into a high-ceiling hall suitable for entertaining, with couches along the edges and an ornate parquet floor for dancing. Gauzy linen curtains covered the east-facing windows, and their diffused light illuminated the space in cool colours, an array of silvers and creams; a few of the chairs were still

covered in white sheets, which gave the impression of a circle of tired ghosts gathering together to rest and convene. A piano sat in the far corner next to the swoop of a gilded harp. There were more paintings on the walls, but these were not as grand and eloquent as those hanging in the main vestibule. Only one painting appeared to be of outstanding quality: a gentleman's portrait hung above the huge slate fireplace. He wore a tall black hat and held a cane with a silver head in the shape of a fish, and his aristocratic expression was bold but not ungainly. In fact, the more I looked upon his picture, I found his melancholy face and mournful eyes to be quite bewitching. He was not a handsome man, but nor was he ugly: his expression contained enough of the restless, romantic, untameable poet to offset any unbalance in his features, which on a barrister or bookkeeper might seem pedantic and bland.

"Harry!" came Jane's frenzied whisper from the front door. "Get back here!"

"Just a moment!" I hissed back.

From the quality of the furniture in the ballroom, I suspected that a gentleman of wealth and breeding -- but possessing an inclination towards an older style of fashion -- had moved into Northwich Hall. The legs of the chairs were carved in a curled style that my grandmother enjoyed, and the artwork slanted heavily towards neoclassicism. I decided he must not want for money, either, for there was an abundance in all things, save for the whisper and warmth of human company.

As my gaze circled the huge assembly room, it fell upon a small archway on the opposite corner of the vast space, leading to an unlit corridor, which was undoubtedly a servant's passage. The feeble squares of sunlight cast from the curtained windows could not reach quite so far, and the light of the ballroom provided only a murky glow, but as my eyes adjusted, I saw deeper into the recess.

There, half-obsured in shadow, stood a monstrous, teratological figure of immense bulk and size, lurking in the darkness. It hunched against the wall, and every muscle remained as still as stone. The hairless, naked skin glowed with a sickly pale pallor, but it was streaked

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with sinewy black lines like the stripes of a tiger. The face was grotesque, misshapen and deformed, and its hands were clasped at its waist, too large and cumbersome to be human. Set deeply in that disfigured face of ink and ice, glittering like orbs of polished amber, were two ferocious, living eyes.

I shrieked.

My shoes slipped on the tiled floor and I collapsed on my hip, dropping my brown shawl, but then I was sliding backwards, pushing myself into a sprint towards the front door, and I snatched up Mary's hand and ran, and my frantic, sudden action cascaded through my sisters until all four of us were sprinting down the driveway and across the parkland, haring for home.