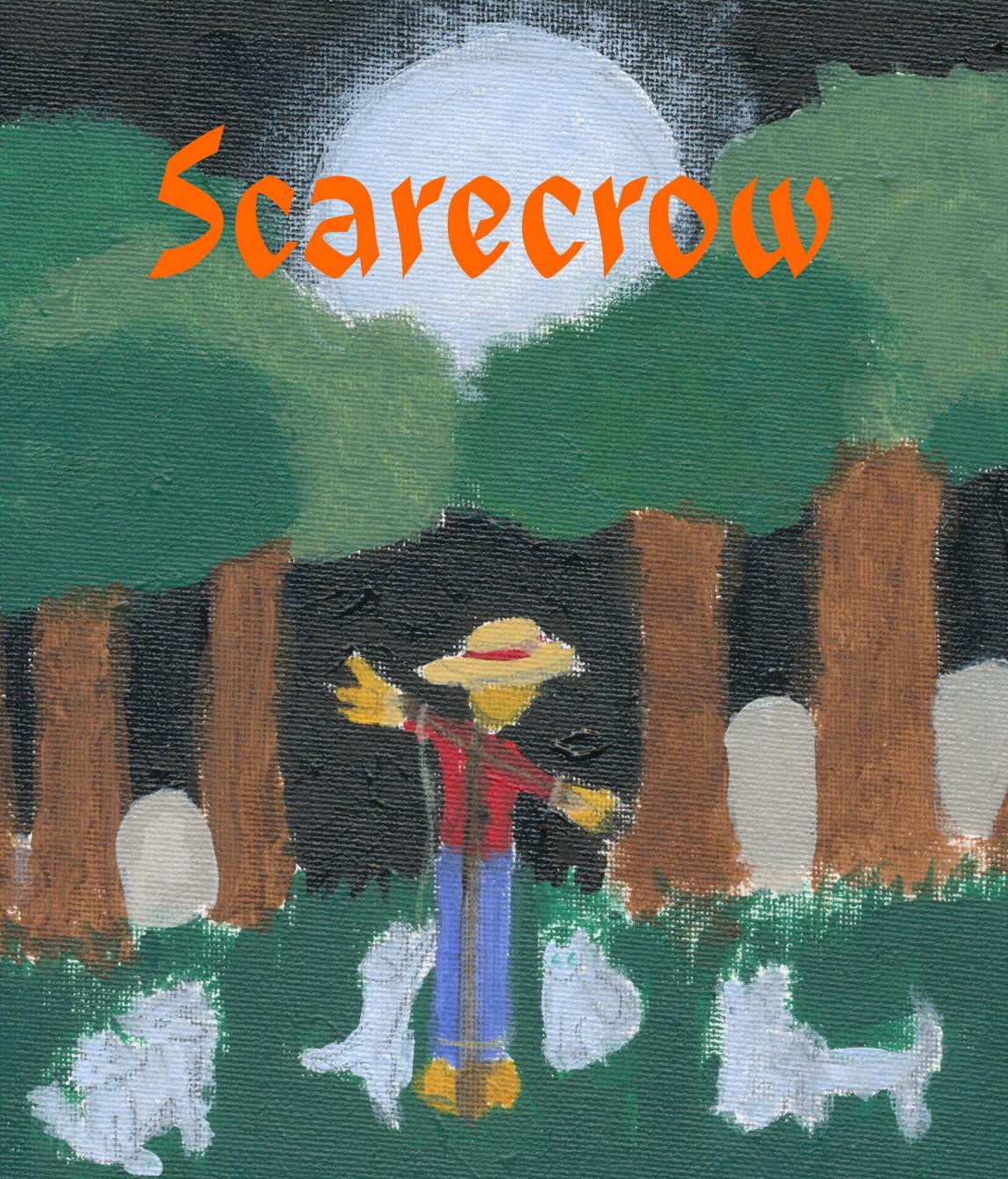


Scarecrow



Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.

Scarecrow

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A Hero Before His Time

Scarecrow

Glenn Slade Clark, Jr.

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Scarecrow

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It was all very quick. There was a feeling of being pushed out of himself, a sudden, shocking chill. There was a light, following him around. He could see it, feel it, hear it; voices calling out, beckoning, but it was wrong. It was all just not quite right. What had happened? Why was everything so cold and dark?

What had happened?

He couldn't fully articulate the emotions behind the question. He couldn't express...but what was expression

without anyone to receive the message? And what had happened to Timothy?

What had happened?

He concentrated, everything was a puzzle, a mystery. Darkness and cold. He focused on what he wished were still there, and the darkness took form. He found light. He was in the kitchen. Timothy was crying. His mother was comforting him. “Oh, Timothy. You just have the worst luck with pets.”

She hugged the boy, and he continued to cry. “I want things to go right, Mom. Just for once! I want to keep one!”

“There, there,” she said as she rocked him back and forth in her arms and rubbed his back warmly. “You know, your birthday’s coming up. I bet we’ll find you a new friend.”

It was wrong. Why was this wrong? *Who am I? Why does this matter?* He looked behind him, into that light. It was warm there, friends were calling. What were they saying? Bundles? His name was Bundles. But he wasn’t going into that warm light. Not yet. He had to understand what was really going on.

“Bundles was my favorite,” Timothy said. “He was the best dog in the world.”

Was? Bundles went to the boy, snuggled up to him, but Timothy did not respond. This was wrong.

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Bundles went out to the field, stared up at the full moon in the sky. The voices from the light were getting fainter, but they were still there. The silhouette of the scarecrow captured his attention. Timothy had always been terrified of the scarecrow. Bundles had never understood why. The boy had never allowed himself to be led near it, or beyond it. Bundles had always wanted to explore. There had always been a scent, pulling him there, a very interesting scent. Not quite animal, not quite food. What was it?

Bundles approached the scarecrow. It was a strange sort of thing. It was shaped like Timothy, with boy-like appendages, standing upright, but tied to a post. It did not smell right for its shape. It smelled of earth and straw. But it was not frightening. Not to Bundles.

He dared to drift beyond the scarecrow, to where the scent had been. He didn't smell it now, but he recalled the aroma, he knew where it had come from, and he found the spot, there among the trees, kissed by the softness of the moonlight.

Rocks...no, the words were in his head now, as they hadn't been before whatever had happened. He knew. They were tombstones. There were words, and he could read them. Mr. Whiskers. Mr. Helmet. Scratch. Patricia. Wynnie. He felt a kinship. Bundles looked underneath the dirt. He looked into the boxes he found there. He could see in the

darkness very well now. They were like him, or at least close to it. But they were broken. They were very broken. Except for Scratch. There was nothing below the dirt. Nothing at all.

“They say I ran away.”

Bundles turned and saw a cat sitting there, but he had no urge to chase it. He could tell that it was like him. “Why did you run away?”

“I didn’t.” The cat shook his head. “I would have, if I’d had any sense. If I’d known what was coming. You should have too. I watched the whole thing. It’s all very wrong. Something should be done. It will happen again. And again. Someone should figure out a way to make it stop.”

Bundles turned back to the tombstones, and he tried to understand what Scratch was saying. When he turned back to ask, the cat was no longer there. Strange.

The day came. The light behind him was even fainter. The voices were still calling, urging him in, but he wasn’t ready. He had to get a grasp on this. Timothy was walking with his father and mother, walking through the field...beyond the scarecrow, into the trees. Bundles followed. They were all standing around a hole, and a new tombstone had been placed. The name “BUNDLES” was carved into it in great,

bold letters. Beneath that: “Faithful friend. 2009—2010. May he know peace.” Peace? Bundles was *not* at peace. This was wrong. This shouldn’t be. He looked at the box, and he knew what lay inside. He allowed himself to look through the wood, to enter the box. He saw himself...but he only knew it was, or had been, such by the feeling he had. There was little left of his furry body other than tangled meat and broken bone. He wanted to cry. He lay in the box and listened to the nice words. Dad had always been so kind. Not like Timothy. Not like the *boy*. Boys were not kind. Boys liked to hurt those who were small and full of trust. Boys were not right.

The box was lifted and then lowered into the hole. Bundles stayed there, feeling sad, as Dad covered the box with dirt, patted it down with the shovel. He felt the gentle tickle of flowers being dropped on his grave by Mom. They had let him go. Bundles was no more. He lost himself in sorrow.

“What are you doing in here?” It was Scratch.

“Go away.”

“You don’t mean that,” Scratch purred. “Come on. Get out of here. It’s bad for your spirit to dwell on such things. The mess you’re clinging to in this box is not you anymore.”

“I am not me anymore. I am gone.”

“Nonsense. The voices in the light; do you still hear them?”

Bundles listened. “I do.”

“Then you are not lost. Not yet.” There was a cunning grin in the cat’s voice. “I don’t hear them anymore. They stopped trying after a few days. I wanted to stay...and make it all right.”

Bundles perked up and regarded the cat. “How can you do that? What can make it right? Why would you stay here in the cold forever?”

“Why would you?”

Bundles sniffled. “I am sad. I was just, mourning. I will go to the ones who call me soon.”

Scratch stiffened at that. “Not me. He told them I ran away. Timothy did.”

“But you didn’t? What happened?”

The cat’s eyes narrowed. “If it were not for the mess you’re laying beside, I would not tell you. None of the others ever had it so bad as you and I.”

“Others?”

“Yes. You’ll meet them in time. We all stayed behind. To make it right. Now, do you really want to hear the true tale of how I ‘ran away?’”

“I suppose.”

The cat purred, satisfied. “Timothy wanted to play, while no one was around. I take it you know how that goes.”

Bundles shivered with the memories brought on by the cat’s simple suggestion.

“I thought so. Anyway, he shoved me into a pillow case in the barn and tied the top with rope. A trick he’d learned from a well meaning veterinarian. It was supposed to keep me *calm* during car rides.” Scratch offered a hacking sort of bitter laugh at this. “He carried me outside. His parents had gone to church, while he pretended to be sick. Surely the madness had come over him the night before, the sick urge, the demonic notion and the need to know how it would feel to do this thing to me.

“I heard him digging a hole. He picked me up and threw me in.”

“Like what happened to me,” Bundles surmised.

“No, not like what happened to you! You were only buried this morning. And your body was already broken. Besides...it doesn’t end with that. Not for me. You see, he started piling on the dirt, but then he stopped. He opened the bag, just enough, and I stuck my head through, hissed and screamed. He held me *firmly*, as he finished packing in the dirt, leaving my head above. He held me until I was too

tired to struggle. The dirt was too heavy. And he got the lawn mower...”

“Please! I can’t hear this.”

“But you know what happened. I don’t *have* to tell you anymore. What remained of my head, he kicked over the fence with *much* laughter. When his parents got home, he met them with distress. ‘I can’t find Scratch anywhere! I think he ran away!’

“They comforted him for a few days, then, after some months, agreed that I had run away, and was likely not coming back. Mom and Dad thought coyotes had gotten me. Dad carved out a tombstone, and thus began this little cemetery. The boy’s own guilt is what always keeps him away, unless his parents bring him out here to bury another pet. He gets a sick thrill out of adding tombstones, but he won’t ever venture out here on his own. I think he knows we’re watching him. Somewhere, in the darkest shadows of his subconscious, he knows.”

“That makes sense. You must have been scared. I didn’t even see what happened to me. I don’t even know. First, I’m running in the field with Timothy, next second, everything is dark and cold.”

“It was the tractor.”

“What?”

“He pushed you into its path, right when you least expected it. I saw him do it. Chopped you right up. He was smiling when it happened, then he summoned up some false tears when Dad stopped the machine and got out. Dad felt very guilty. He is good. Always was kind to us.”

Bundles was even more upset now than he had been before. “True. And Timothy was cruel. Boys are cruel. I hate them.”

The cat’s eyes filled with a malevolent grin. “Good. So do we. Boys come into the field at night. Timothy’s friends. Sometimes they bring girls. I try to get them, but I just pass through. In the house and barn, I can make the lights blink. Sometimes, I can turn other things off and on, but I can’t make things move. I can’t get at those terrible boys.”

“I wish I knew what to do,” Bundles lamented. “I want to get them too.”

“You can, I think. You have a strong spirit. If you try, I bet you could make things move. You could get them.”

Bundles listened to the voices, calling his name from the warm, now much more distant light. “You give me much to think on, Scratch.”

“Let me know what you decide,” the cat purred, and he was gone.

Bundles spent the rest of the night in his coffin, thinking and thinking.

The next night, Bundles went back into the world. The warm, beckoning light was so faint he could barely see it, the voices so soft he could barely hear them. *Not yet. I have to make things right.* He thought about the things Scratch had said, about trying to get the boys in the field. He drifted out towards the scarecrow again, marveling that such an odd thing could frighten Timothy so. He felt that he was not alone, turned, and saw the others. “Hello, I’m Bundles.”

“We know,” the big dog said. “Scratch told us about you. We were waiting to see if you’d stay. I’m Wynnie.”

“I’m Patricia,” announced a little dachshund.

“And I’m Mr. Helmet,” mewed a cat whose fur patterns made it look as if he were wearing a white helmet over his orange fur. He nodded to the wild eyed, long haired cat beside him. “This is Mr. Whiskers. Mr. Whiskers never speaks.”

Bundles nodded. “It’s good to know you.”

“So,” Wynnie asked, “are you on board to help us?”

“I am. I just wish I knew how. Scratch told me he’s tried and failed to get the boys in the field, that he can turn lights on and off, but I don’t see how any such thing can help us.”

Mr. Helmet piped up, “Mr. Whiskers can pinch Timothy. Just a little. It’s funny as hell to watch. I can make him see me, just for a second or so. Then I lose my concentration. I lose my battle with his rational mind.”

“Every now and then,” Wynnie added, “I can bark at him and make him hear me, but it’s like Mr. Helmet said. I can’t sustain it. It gives him a start, just enough so he wonders if he really heard a dog barking at him, but not enough to let him know we’re after him for how he treated us.”

“I can’t do shit, man. I wish I were dead.” Patricia winked and shook her leg as if to laugh.

Most of the other spirits were likewise amused.

Mr. Whiskers just stared at the dachshund with wide, insane eyes. His friends had often suspected that, even though he had himself been murdered by the boy, Mr. Whiskers was more than a little bit freaked out by ghosts.

Bundles considered his new friends and their abilities. “I guess I’m with Patricia. I wish I had some skill to offer the cause. I’d like to get that boy and make him pay.” Angrily, Bundles started scratching the ground with his back paws, kicking up dirt, as if preparing to charge.

The others watched in astonishment.

Scratch appeared then, laughing lightly. “Bundles, I knew you were a strong spirit.”

“Huh?” Bundles stopped what he was doing and regarded Scratch. “What do you mean?”

Scratch nodded in the former dog’s direction. “Look behind you.”

Bundles did. “I don’t...” he noticed the upturned grass and earth. “Oh! I can move the dirt!”

“Try something else,” Scratch suggested.

Bundles looked to the scarecrow beside him. He stretched up on his hind legs, leaning against the post, and batted at the thing’s right leg until it came free of its binding. He swung the leg back and forth, marveling at his ability to do so.”

“That boy is so fuckin’ dead,” Patricia said. “We’re gonna mess him up with Bundles here! Let’s go!”

“No, not yet,” Scratch said. “We need to perfect our skills. All of us need to practice daily. I feel with Bundles’ strength honed to perfection, we’ll be able to do this quickly and cleanly. Patience brings the greater payoff.”

The other spirits nodded their agreement, except for Mister Whiskers, who just stared at his companions in wide-eyed horror.

“I can practice all night, every night,” Bundles said. “I’m starting to get an idea of what we might do.” He looked at the scarecrow and let his imagination run wild.

“Okay,” Patricia said, “but I just have one question.”

“What is that?” Scratch invited.

“If most of us can’t touch shit without passing through it, then why don’t we all just sink through the ground? I mean, seriously, that does not make sense!”

Wynn timer and Scratch just rolled their eyes. Wynn timer’s verbal response to the dachshund’s question was, “Oh, just go with it, Patricia. Try not to think so much. It’s scary.”

As the other animal spirits went their own way for the night, assuring Bundles what a pleasure it had been to meet him, Bundles stared up at the scarecrow. He lunged up again, and he freed the other leg of wires and straw from the ropes that held it to the cross-shaped post in the field. *So many possibilities*, he thought. *Lots of work ahead of me now*. He began to wag his tail for the first time since he’d died.

Seventeen more days passed, and it was now Timothy’s sixteenth birthday. Bundles had been practicing and practicing, even though Dad would periodically find the scarecrow’s arms or legs loose and re-tie them to the post. Bundles was getting better and better at untying them. Feeling almost ready to take on his killer, Bundles ventured into the house for the first time in weeks. The boy was just finishing breakfast with his parents.

“I know your party isn’t until tonight,” Mom said, “but your dad and I wanted to give you a present this morning.”

“Yep,” Dad added. “I don’t think this one can wait.”

Suddenly Bundles noticed Scratch at his side, as they watched the boy’s excitement at the box his father brought into the room. “This should upset you,” the cat said, seeming strangely comforted by that thought.

Timothy opened the big package and was greeted by the excited yipping of a new puppy. “A new dog!” He held the puppy up and hugged it to his chest. The puppy licked his face with delight.

“No,” Bundles breathed out in horror.

“Oh, yes,” Scratch assured him. “I’m afraid so. The cycle begins anew.” He eyed Bundles shrewdly. “Unless, of course, we take action soon.” He looked to the happy new puppy, innocently unaware of the fate he’d been delivered into, as the boy seemingly loved and petted him with joy. “I was thinking tonight.”

“Yes,” Bundles agreed solemnly. “Tonight. We won’t let this happen again.”

The day went on. Darkness fell. Timothy’s party passed. His friends went home. The animal spirits gathered by the scarecrow, watching the house, until the last light went out.

The new dog's name was Alex. Bundles held the name close, as he thought of why they had to make this work tonight. "It's time," he said, eager to begin.

"Yes. I'm sorry we can't help you here," Scratch offered.

"That's okay. I've gotten very good at it," Bundles said, as he worked the ropes off of the scarecrow's arms and legs. "I've just never taken it all the way off of the post before." Bundles tugged and tugged at the ropes that held the scarecrow's torso to the post. Mr. Whiskers, though still wide-eyed and silent, surprised everyone by climbing the post and working at the higher rope. He wasn't as good as Bundles, but it was clear he'd been practicing his pinching. In little time, he'd worked through the top rope, and Bundles had untied the lower one. The scarecrow fell to the ground in a heap.

"Okay, so...now what," Wynn timer asked.

The animal spirits looked to Bundles expectantly.

"Can you do it," asked Mr. Helmet.

"Only one way to find out." Bundles, had he still been able to breathe, would have taken a deep breath and let it out, as he appeared to do, just before he sunk himself into the scarecrow, pulling himself fully inside of it, as though it were his old body.

There was no visible sign of Bundles then. The scarecrow just lay there, bent and twisted.

“Well,” asked Patricia with growing impatience. “Did it work? I don’t think it fuckin’ worked! What do we do now?”

Just then, the scarecrow sat up, turning its head to stare directly at Patricia.

“Oh, *shit!*” shouted the little dachshund. “Oh shit! We’re in the game now! *Hellz yeah!*”

A thought occurred to Scratch, as Bundles pushed himself up with the scarecrow’s arms and wobblingly got to his feet, standing like the boy stood, though with much less confidence. “Bundles, have you ever tried a vocalization? Wynnie can do it. So that the living can hear?”

“No, but I can try,” answered the scarecrow in Bundles’ voice. There was silence for a few moments, as Bundles gathered his strength. Then, not words so much as a terrible, agonized growl emanated from the body of the scarecrow. Bundles shook his head, as the other spirits, sans Mr. Whiskers, barked and mewed with joy. “I couldn’t make words.”

“That’ll do,” said Scratch. “You can make sounds; sounds enough to frighten Timothy.”

“Ooh, I can’t *wait* to see the look on that bitch’s face when we...,” Patricia stopped and looked to Scratch. “What are we gonna do to him anyway?”

“Tonight? We’re just going to frighten him. We’re just going to let him know that someone is watching. He sees the scarecrow as the guardian that stands between his home and our graves. He will know what it means, when Bundles makes his appearance.”

“And it will save Alex from what happened to us,” Bundles added determinedly.

“At the very least,” amended Scratch, “it will buy him some time.”

“Let’s do it then.” Slowly, unsteadily, Bundles began to walk, as humans walked. Mr. Helmet circled him, stopping to put his paws up whenever it seemed as though the scarecrow would fall, not thinking about the fact that it would just pass through him if it did. The others simply followed, eager for results.

Bundles made his way up to Timothy’s window and looked in.

“Well? Do you see him,” asked Wynn timer.

“Yes,” Bundles answered. “He’s lying on the bed. I think he’s asleep. Alex is with him.”

“So...,” Patricia asked, “...if your face is made of cloth and your head is made of hay, how is it exactly that you can see? I mean, you don’t have eyes.”

Exasperated, Wynnie answered the little dog. “Patricia, don’t ask dumb questions.”

“That’s not a dumb question, Wynnie! Bitch ain’t got no *eyes!*”

“He can see.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. Magic?”

“Magic? Are we all magic?”

“We’re ghosts,” Wynnie said with an annoyed sigh. “If you wanted answers, maybe you should have gone into the light.”

“Ladies,” Scratch interrupted. “As of tonight, we *are* the answer. Now let’s watch as Bundles lets Timothy know it.” He nodded to the scarecrow. The scarecrow nodded back and turned his attention back to the window.

Timothy stirred, as the slight tapping on his window woke him up. It wasn’t very loud. Just a scratching really. Probably just the wind. He opened his eyes and saw his new puppy, Alex, nuzzled up against him. He sat up and caressed the sleeping innocent. “Good Alex. Let’s see...how long shall I let you live?” He laughed quietly, as the puppy slept on in ignorance. Just then, the tapping turned into a

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thud, and it repeated. Timothy turned and was stricken mute with horror, as the scarecrow's arm swung for a third time with all its might at his window. The glass shattered.

“BUUUUUUUUNNNNNDDLLLLLLESSSS!!!!”

The thing moaned out in rage, in despair.

Timothy opened his mouth to scream, but no sound escaped. Alex was up and barking at the monster outside the boy's window. Timothy's jaw worked, as another scream failed to escape his frozen larynx, and then his eyes rolled back in his head, and he lost consciousness. The little pup licked him ferociously, then looked back to the scarecrow and sniffed the air. He seemed unsure how to feel. The thing smelled only of earth and hay. Whining slightly, keeping his eyes on the scarecrow, Alex curled up beside the sleeping boy and soon joined him in restless slumber.

Slowly, more steadily than before, fueled by the power of his success, Bundles backed away from the window. The other animal spirits cheered him on, as he walked back to the post in the field. All except for Mr. Whiskers of course, who stared after them all, looking as though he'd just seen a ghost.

The next night, Bundles once again took the scarecrow for a walk, this time just to practice walking. He was getting

better and better at *being* the scarecrow. The night before, they had left the scarecrow at the base of the post, not knowing how to tie it back. Bundles had watched Dad closely after the sun had come up and he was tying it back. Timothy had been with him in a state of sheer panic. Dad had been explaining that one of Timothy's friends had probably been playing a trick on him.

Bundles studied the ropes. He practiced tying and untying them after he'd removed himself from the post. He was sure he could do it again, when he returned. He didn't want Dad to make it harder for him to escape at night. He wanted to leave everything in its place, if he could.

Bundles wandered into the forest, beyond the little pet cemetery. He caught sight of Scratch in the grave yard, watching with satisfaction. Scratch had told them all the night before that the plan was in full swing. They just had to all practice. They had to do all that they could to scare the boy every night, until they were strong enough to make things right. Bundles wanted to be perfect when the time came. He wanted to move just as easily as the boy could move. He wanted to *push things*, just as surely as the boy had pushed him. He walked into the darkness of the trees and sparse moonlight. He heard voices.

“Come on, Talia. I'll pull out, I swear.”

“No, Rick. I just don’t want to, okay? Now take me home.”

Bundles found the voices. There were a boy and a girl, sitting by a fire. The boy was trying to hurt the girl. Bundles hated boys.

“No. Come on, just give it a chance. You’ll see. I promise.”

The girl tried to stand up, but the boy grabbed her by the arms. “You’ll thank me for this tomorrow.”

“Rick, no!”

He pushed her down and kissed her, though she struggled to escape from his grip. He stopped suddenly, at the sound of something moving in the brush. He looked up and saw the scarecrow. He laughed. “Oh, shit! That’s great! Who is that?”

The boy let the girl go, and she saw the scarecrow and screamed. “Oh my god! Rick, let’s go! Take me home!”

Rick stood up, laughing. “Calm down, Talia. It’s just some jack ass playing a trick.” He approached the scarecrow, as it stood there, looking from the boy to the girl and back again. “Kessler, is that you? Come on, ya dick. I know it’s you in there.” He laughed again and shoved the scarecrow.

Bundles was startled by the push, and he lost his balance, limbs flailing as he fell. The boy laughed and laughed.

“Dude, can you even see through that mask? Take that thing off.”

“Rick! Now! I want to go home!”

Bundles wanted to push the boy back. He was tired of boys who pushed. He wanted to break the boy, the way that Timothy had broken him. He wished there were something to use to make the boy break right there. As he sat up, he saw a rock right beside him that he thought might just do the trick. He grabbed the rock, and he pushed himself up, getting back to his feet.

Rick was still laughing. “Dude, this is getting annoying. Really. Say something, Kessler!”

And then the scarecrow spoke, hating the boy, hating all boys who pushed and broke weaker things. “BUUUUUUNNNDDLES!”

Rick went pale at the inhuman sound of the scarecrow’s voice. Without turning around, he backed up slowly. “Talia...let’s...let’s go home now. I think...this isn’t funny anym—” he tripped on a tree root and fell backwards.

Bundles gripped the rock in the scarecrow’s hand and advanced on the fallen boy. “BUUUUUUNNNNN-DDDLLLLLLLES!” he snarled, freezing the terrified teenager in place, as he fell on him and hammered at his head with the rock, hearing it crack, watching the blood flow like an angry river from every opening that he made, every collaps-

ing crater in the boy's skull. The boy stopped moving. He was broken. Bundles had made it right for the girl. He looked up and saw her terror. The girl stammered and quaked. Tears were streaming down her face. Bundles went to her to tell her that it was going to be okay. The boy was broken now. She had nothing to fear.

Bundles held out his hand to pet her, to make her feel better, but she finally managed a scream. She went into a trained self-defense trance, knocking his arm away and hitting him from the side with a roundhouse kick that swept him off his feet.

Bundles flew to the side like a bag of feathers. The girl went sickly pale. "Th-th-there's no one inside..." She heaved, threw up. Bundles stood again. He faced her, unsure what to do. Had the boy already broken her? Had he been too late? He walked towards her again.

"Stay away!" She held up her fingers in the form of a cross. She screamed, "Help!!! Somebody help me!!!" as she ran from him.

Suddenly, Bundles realized that the entire plan might come undone if she got help. She didn't understand. She was broken. The boy had broken her when he had pushed her. He could only help her by making her stop now; stop and just be broken.

The girl ran through the trees, back towards the boy's car. Bundles ran too. His legs were not as long as the girl's. He leapt into the air and was startled at how high and how far he could go in the lightweight body of the scarecrow. He landed right in front of the girl as she got to the car. She tried to scream for help one more time, but Bundles hit her across the face with the rock. She fell. In a stunned daze, she looked up at the scarecrow and she wept. "Please...please let me live!"

Bundles was sorry. He wanted to tell her, but all that came out was the inhuman growl. The girl trembled and screamed to whomever might hear, "Help me!!!"

He brought the rock down on her skull, silencing her. He brought it down again and again, until nothing was left of her head. She had been broken, but it was the boy who had broken her. Now Bundles knew how to break boys too. Dropping the rock by the girl's body, the scarecrow made its way back to the farm, back to the post, and he was all the more pleased when, after a long time of struggling, he finally managed to tie the ropes back into place, just as they'd been before.

At daybreak, Bundles told Scratch about his adventure, and the cunning old cat was thrilled by the news. "I have a plan," the dog said.

"I'm listening," purred the cat.

“You say you can turn lights on and off. Can you turn on a car?”

“I’ve never tried,” Scratch confessed. “But I can certainly give it a shot.”

More solemnly, Bundles asked, “Do you think, if you start the car...do you think you could *drive* it?”

Scratch purred even louder, as he answered. “I can try.”

Bundles told him the plan. After hearing him out, Scratch agreed with a vigorous thrill.

As the day wore on, Scratch wanted to see the bodies. He wanted to see what Bundles could do. Bundles led him into the forest, to the spot where the body of the boy lay. There were creatures around, and, to the astonishment of the ghosts, Alex was among them. The puppy had wandered out to the forest and was gnawing on the boy’s remains. Scratch and Bundles looked at each other with morbid approval. They stayed a while, to see just how much boy meat the little pup could ingest.

Mom found Dad in the garage, sorting through the tools. “We need to talk,” she said flatly.

Dad grunted.

“No, I mean it. Something is happening in this house, and we need to face it, before it gets out of hand.”

“Do you think they’re talking about our practice?” Bundles asked Scratch, from the passenger seat of the car, as the cat tried once again to start the ignition. Scratch had found the mechanism much more difficult to manipulate than the light switches in the house, and had yet to achieve his goal.

“I hope so,” Scratch answered, distractedly.

Dad sighed, put the lid down on the tool box on the shelf, and turned to his wife. “Nothing’s happening in this house, Dora.”

“Ignoring it won’t make it go away, dear,” she tightly retorted. “I know what Timothy says sounds farfetched, about the scarecrow coming to life. But even you’ve seen the lights go on in the middle of the night over the past couple of weeks. Or when you leave the room and come back to find all the lights turned off, or the TV channel changed.”

“That’s just...I don’t know...interference.”

“Interference? What kind of interference?”

The man shrugged. “I don’t know. Just...interference. Weather or something. Nothing to get worked up over.”

“We have a ghost, John.”

“Oh, jeez...no we don’t.” He sighed again, tiredly.

“Yeah,” said Bundles. “They’re definitely talking about us.” He wagged his tail.

“Good,” Scratch said, still trying to get the ignition to turn with his paw.

Dad corrected his wife; a hint of anger creeping into his voice. “There’s no ghost in this house. The scarecrow did *not* come to life—”

“But you said yourself that you had to go tie it back to the post—”

“Only once. Yesterday. The scarecrow was right where it was supposed to be this morning, in spite of what Tim said. It was probably just that one time, and he imagined that it was missing again last night, because he was still a little scared. His friends were just playing a prank, Dora.” Sternly, he added, “And when I find out which friends, I’m going to see to it they pay for that window I had to replace!”

“Well,” she reasoned, “maybe the ghost has taken to tying the scarecrow back...so as not to be found out.”

“Oh, so now it’s a smart ghost!”

“About that,” Patricia broke in, startling Bundles and Scratch with her sudden appearance behind them.

“Don’t *do* that, Patricia,” Bundles said with a laugh in his voice. “You scared us.”

“Dude, you’re ghosts! Get over bein’ scared of shit already. I swear, y’all and Mr. Whiskers need to join a support group or somethin’. But yeah, I’ve been wonderin’, how did you tie the ropes back if you ain’t got no hands?”

“He has hands,” Scratch said.

“Not *real* hands! He’s just got some little tufts of straw. How’d he pick up a rock and—”

“Oh, Patricia, I’m trying to concentrate. Please spare us your ridiculous questions.” Scratch did his best to ignore her as he kept at the ignition.

“Fine, bitch. Fuck you. Tell me how it goes *this* time. ’Cause you *sure* ain’t got no hands!” She vanished then and left them to their task. Bundles resumed listening in on Mom and Dad’s conversation.

“It’s been one thing after another for weeks now,” Mom said. “And Timothy and I have both heard barks in the house. Not the sort that would come from Alex, either. It sounds like a bigger dog. Like Wynnies was. And I swear I *saw* Mr. Helmet just this morning, when I was fixing breakfast. He was just sitting there, by Alex, and then he vanished right before my eyes.”

“Are you under a lot of stress?” Dad asked, genuinely concerned. “I haven’t seen any signs of it, but that’s my best explanation. Maybe you need to get away. Go visit your sister in San Diego, take some time to relax. I can handle things here for a while, with Timothy, if you need me to.”

“John, I am *not* crazy. Something weird is going on in this house, and I just want to get to the bottom of it. Would you at least let me explore the *possibility*?”

Dad exhaled with dramatic resignation. “I suppose. What do you want to do?”

“I want to call in some experts.”

“Experts?”

“Yes. Paranormal investigators. There are these two brothers who live in town that go all over making videos for their YouTube channel. The Anderson brothers. I want to call them, because they’re already *in* Nightfire, and they have experience.”

“Are you *kidding*? You wanna get a couple local kids who make pornos on the computer to come and look for your ghost? Forget it.”

“If you would just get with the twenty-first century, you’d know the difference between paranormal investigation videos and porno, John. They do things like EVP readings, dousing rods, infra red recordings...”

“Okay, okay. How about we wait, one more week. Let’s just see if anything else happens. If it gets worse, go ahead and call the Anderson boys, if that’s what it’ll take to calm you down. If it goes away on its own, then we don’t need to do anything to exacerbate the situation. We’ll just let it rest.”

“So, you at least acknowledge there is a situation to *be* exacerbated?”

“I acknowledge nothing.” He smiled. “Now, if you don’t mind, I need to finish up in here.”

“Okay.” She returned his smile and kissed him on the cheek. “Dinner will be ready soon. Be sure to wash your hands.” She left, closing the door into the house behind her.

“Crazy woman.” The man shook his head and laughed to himself.

Just then, the car started with a roar, and John nearly jumped out of his skin. He turned around, his heart beating almost right out of his chest, and stared at the car, not sure what to think or how to respond.

“Success!” Scratch crowed.

“Yes!” Bundles’ tail wagged beside him. He noticed Dad coming up to the passenger side window, looking through in utter bewilderment at the seemingly empty seats. “Now, can you turn it off?”

“Certainly.” Scratch manipulated the ignition switch with a paw, and the engine stopped just as suddenly as it had started.

Dad backed up to the door, wide eyed. “Okay,” he said aloud to no one at all. “Maybe we need to call those boys out here to have a look. Maybe...” He reached behind himself and opened the door to the house without turning his back to the car, and he let himself in, closing the door with a terrified slam.

Scratch’s eyes narrowed to self-satisfied slits, as he purred. “Today the car, tomorrow, the tractor.”

Bundles looked to the wall, where the oversized tools were hung. He noticed a hatchet, considered its possibilities. “Why wait? I say we do a practice run now. Just to scare them. Keep them afraid.”

“Agreed,” Scratch purred. “Tonight.”

“It’s really freaky shit, Kessler. I just need to let someone know what’s happening.”

“What do you mean, Tim?” Kessler asked, sitting in the chair across from the other boy’s bed. “I’ve never seen you like this. Is it about Rick and Talia?”

“No. Not exactly,” Timothy answered, sitting on the edge of his bed. “That sort of makes me think though. They never went home last night. It’s been almost twenty-four hours since anyone even heard from them. Everyone’s sort of freaked.”

“Yeah,” Kessler agreed. “They haven’t answered their cell phones, they haven’t been on Facebook. Not a peep. It’s weird. Unless...”

“What?”

A giant grin took over Kessler’s face. “Unless they’re still fucking. Maybe they’re having a marathon go of it or something.” He laughed.

Tim didn't. "No, really, Kessler. I think something happened to them. Rick said he was taking her to the woods last night."

"Yeah, but we've all been in the woods with girls. We've all come back too. Why hasn't anyone checked the woods anyway?" A sick look colored Kessler's face as he considered what might be there to find. "You know, I've heard a lot of stories about those woods, growing up. Lots of weird shit. Every now and again, something pops up, you know? Like in this book I read about Nightfire's legends. Lot's of bad stuff, man. Even that tornado, back in '97. Some people say it wasn't a tornado at all. Some people believe wholeheartedly that it was some kind of werewolf or something. Those people will tell you some shit about those woods, if you let them. Demons, vampires, werewolves, undead Indians. Shit. You should borrow that book, though. It's supposed to be all about Nightfire's local myths, but it comes off more like a book of creepy as fuck ghost stories and shit. This town's a paranormal investigator's Holy Grail."

"Well, that's the thing." Timothy looked more aroused by the idea than frightened. "My mom wants to call them in."

"Who?"

"Luke and Jazz."

“She wants to do something with their fucked up YouTube shit? Why?”

“Cause our house is haunted.”

“For real?” Kessler looked electrified by the suggestion. “Since when?”

“Since the fucking scarecrow came to life and knocked out my window, and the lights have started turning on and off by themselves. I heard my dad telling my mom in whispers that the car turned itself on and off while he was in the garage. She said she was calling them right then, but he got her to agree to wait and see if it all calmed down. She really wants to call them.”

“You’re shittin’ me.” Kessler grinned in suspicion.

“Dude, you’re the one who was just going on about how fucked up the woods are. I’m just saying, maybe the scarecrow got ’em. We do live right by the woods. And I saw, last night, the scarecrow was gone. Then it was back again this morning.”

“Well let’s go look. Dude, we *should* call Luke and Jazz!”

For the first time, Timothy looked genuinely frightened. “I don’t want to go out there. I think it’s...mad at me.”

“Mad at you? For what?”

“I don’t know,” Timothy lied. He shrugged. “I just get the feeling it wants to hurt me bad. Like it...” he paled at the partial confession, “...blames me for something.”

“Nah, it can’t hurt you, dude! It’s a fucking scarecrow! It’s just a bunch of straw. Probably some ghost movin’ it around! Or it could be Rick, just fuckin’ with you.”

“Well don’t you think we’d have heard from him by now? It’s not like he’s home in bed, tired from a night of pranking me. His parents don’t know where he is.”

“You look scared,” Kessler realized. “You never look scared. You’re *Mister I-Don’t-Give-A-Shit*.”

Just then, the bark of a large dog startled both of them. Kessler jumped to his feet, and Timothy picked his feet up off the floor and held his knees to his chest on the bed. Alex woke up from his puppy nap behind him, ears cocked, and sniffed the air.

“That was *not* Alex,” Kessler realized aloud. He pulled back the curtain and looked to the field, astonished. “The scarecrow’s gone!”

“Yeah...we’ve been hearing sounds like that barking too. When things start to happen.”

“Well, dude, look at the time!” Kessler turned his phone on after the statement and actually did look at the time, though he didn’t retain it. “I gotta get home.”

“It’s Friday!” Timothy protested, slowly lowering his feet to the ground and rising, as Kessler put on his jacket and grabbed the keys to his motor bike.

“It is...and your house is haunted as fuck. So, I’m going somewhere less freaky, like Dan Parkers, or even the Witch’s Tree for that matter!” He stopped and shrugged sympathetically. “You can come along, if you want. You may live here, but like you said, it’s Friday. Let’s *both* get the fuck out of here for a while.”

Timothy nodded. “Good point. Let’s go.” He followed Kessler to the bedroom door.

Kessler opened it and froze in horror at the sight of the scarecrow blocking his way. “BUUUUUUNNNN-DDDLLLLLLLES!” the monster growled out in that utterly soul-freezing voice which had terrified Timothy to the bones the first time he’d seen the thing at his window.

Kessler stammered, as he stared at it, trying to remember how to breathe. “Sh-sh-shi-shi-shit!”

The scarecrow’s arm arced through the air, bringing the blade of the hatchet to rest firmly in Kessler’s forehead. Bundles was rewarded by the sight of yet another bloody river pouring out of the boy’s skull, as he fell to the ground, broken. The ghost was beginning to identify the deep red color of blood as the color of success itself, of victory. He looked to Timothy, staring the boy right in the eyes. All boys were bad, Bundles had decided, but this boy, staring right at him, this was the very *worst* of all boys. This was the boy who had pushed him into the tractor, the boy who had

broken Scratch, Mr. Whiskers, Patricia, Mr. Helmet, and Wynnie. Bundles knelt down and roughly yanked his hatchet from Kessler's skull, motioning to Alex, whose tail was wagging as he watched from the bed. Alex jumped down and began licking at Kessler's wound, then nibbling on the torn flesh, pulling, tearing. The scarecrow stood and stepped towards Timothy.

Timothy immediately wet himself and passed out, uttering little more than a powerless grunt of submission as he fell.

Bundles stared at the boy, studying the subtle movement of his chest as he breathed shallowly. The boy of boys was not yet broken. But he was hurt. He was afraid, like Scratch had been when he'd known the lawn mower was on its way and nothing could be done to stop it. The ghosts he'd made were now the lawn mower, and Timothy's head was sticking out of the ground, watching their approach, powerless. Bundles laughed, and the inhuman, terrible sound that was the result filled the entire farm house, as he left the boy to wait for the inevitable restitution of his former pets.

Alex looked up, tail still wagging, as he watched the scarecrow depart. He yipped once gleefully after him, then, glancing over to Timothy and snarling fiercely, caught the

scent of the meat before him and happily returned to his feast.

Timothy's father ran into the room and nearly tripped over Kessler's body. "Oh, God!" Alex looked up from his meal, growling and snapping at the air in the man's direction. He started to bark, and John picked him up, holding his snapping jaws at bay. "You little *monster!*" He opened the window and tossed the puppy unceremoniously out into the night, then leaned down, feeling his son's chest, the heartbeat. He shook him. "Timothy, wake up! Wake up!"

Roused, the boy opened his eyes and spoke weakly. "Huh? Dad?" Suddenly he remembered, and his eyes went wide with terror. "Dad! We have to go! It's alive! It's *alive!* We have to get out! Kessler! Kessler's dead!"

"I know. I know." He hugged his son, both of them trembling, both of them in shock. "Just relax. Calm down. Breathe." He rocked his son back and forth in his arms, thinking the boy a murderer. "We'll hide the body. No one has to know."

Timothy's mother heard the commotion from outside, where she'd been reading on the porch. She got up from the rocker, shut off the light on her Kindle, and turned to go into the house. That noise—had it been laughter?—surely

not; it had sounded so *demonic*. And she had clearly heard her son shout out “Kessler’s dead!” She turned to the door, but then she heard a rustling in the grass. She turned around and saw, to her astonishment, the scarecrow. It stopped, regarded her. Was it holding a hatchet? It was! Was it a friend of Timothy’s playing a trick?

The scarecrow made a noise; an inhuman, terrible noise that *almost* sounded like a word. “MMMMMOOOOOMMMMM!”

No. It wasn’t a trick. The scarecrow was being used by something from Hell. The scarecrow was alive, like Timothy had told them.

Bundles was disappointed that Mom had not understood. He was trying to be friendly. Mom had always been so nice. She was scared now. He didn’t want that. He felt sad at the realization. Mom had never been afraid of him. He watched her, wordlessly. She was shaking. She dropped her Kindle to the ground, opened the door, and slammed it behind her.

“John!” she cried out, as she made her way to Timothy’s room. Arriving in the doorway, she screamed out from the very depths of her being. She closed her eyes, caught her breath. When she was ready, she reopened her eyes, deliberately looking past the murdered body of Timothy’s friend.

Her husband was holding their son, both of them wide-eyed with fear. “What happened?”

“Tim says the scarecrow did it,” John answered gently. He then mouthed his beliefs to her, motioning to their son with his eyes. *He did it.*

“No...no, John...I saw it! Outside! I saw the scarecrow! It’s alive! *It* did this!”

John closed his eyes, gathering his patience. “Dora...this is not the way to help him. We’ll hide the body. We’ll bury it in the barn. We’ll bury his bike. No one will ever know.”

“But, John! We *need* to call somebody!”

John stood up, monstrous with anger, *needing* to protect his son. “No! Dora!” With deadly seriousness, a not-so-veiled threat, he said, “This. Didn’t. Happen. I *will* erase *any* chance there is of *anyone* finding out otherwise. *No one* is sending my son to jail. Do you understand me?”

Terrified, determined, and clever, Dora answered, “Yes. No one will ever know, John. I promise.” She nodded, thinking. “I’ll go get something to clean this up. We’ll have to take the carpet up, and tonight, before anyone thinks to come here.”

Tears streaming down her husband’s face, he nodded. “Okay. Tim and I will bury...Kessler.”

Dora left them as quickly as she could. She went into the garage, turned on the light, and closed the door behind her, taking out her cell phone and dialing as quickly as her trembling fingers would allow her.

From the car, Scratch watched. He'd been practicing turning it on and off, but until now no one had seemed to notice. He debated with himself whether to continue, or to listen to Mom's clearly secret conversation. In the end, being a cat in death just as much as he had been in life, curiosity won the argument. He rested his paws on the steering wheel and silently perched there, waiting to hear what Mom was doing making a phone call where no one could hear.

"Ali? Hi! This is Dora. Listen, I have to talk fast, and, I know it sounds weird, but I need to talk to Luke."

"Luke?" came Ali's voice from the other end. "Dora, what's wrong? You sound upset. Is everything okay?"

"Well, no. No, it's not. We've had some bad things happen here tonight. Frankly, it's right up your sons' alley. You know...their YouTube thing."

Ali laughed. "Dora, you did say you were reading one of my books, didn't you? The one about the closet monster?"

In fact, Dora had been reading Ali Anderson's latest horror novel at the very minute all Hell had broken loose in

her house, but she knew what she'd seen, and it had not been a trick of her imagination. "Ali, I didn't imagine it."

"All right," Ali said, seriously. "We just need to ask those kinds of questions before doing an investigation. The boys will ask you more when they talk to you. Most investigations end right over the phone. Just preparing you for that. So, what happened anyway? Can you tell me before you tell Luke?"

"You believe in this stuff?"

"You write what you know," Ali laughed. "Besides, who do you think bought the boys their first night vision camera?"

"Well, Ali..." she thought of Kessler. "I *can't* tell you everything." She walked away from the door, trying to get as far away from any potential eavesdroppers as she could. She stopped against the wall, just in front of the car, much to Scratch's delight. This gave him a much better vantage point.

"You see...it's the scarecrow."

Silent alarm bells went off in Scratch's mind. *No! No, she can't! She'll ruin the whole thing!* Scratch readied to turn the ignition on, and then he paused suddenly to take in a startling sight.

Patricia began emerging from the speaker of Mom's cell phone, squirming into the air from the little hole like a

worm, until she was free. “Bitch! I found my power!” She trotted through the air until she was sitting on the hood of the car right in front of Scratch. “I can suck the juice out of batteries!”

Scratch’s eyes narrowed, as he watched Mom pull the phone away from her ear and look at it in horror. “Excellent.” He turned the ignition.

Mom looked into the headlights and screamed.

Scratch threw the car into Drive then jumped on the floor, pressing the gas pedal to the ground. The tires screeched, as the car lurched forward, slamming into Mom and right through the wall. Scratch jumped up and quickly threw the car back into Park and turned it off, debris from the wall raining down around Patricia.

From the hood of the car, Patricia looked around, assessing the situation. “Daaaaaaamn! You are one fucked up little pussy cat!”

Scratch walked through the windshield and joined the dachshund on the hood. “It couldn’t be helped. She knew too much, and she was going to try to stop us.”

“She always fed me though. She told me I was good.”

“Yes. And now she’s dead. We have to act quickly.” Scratch purred as he leapt from the hood onto the ground.

Patricia bounded after him. “What do you mean? And how the *hell* did you know how to do all that shit, man? I

thought all you could do was turn shit on and off. Never seen you move shit.”

“I was feeling inspired. And what I mean is, we have to gather the others. It’s time to act. Dad will call the police, or he’ll try to take Timothy away from here. If we’re going to have our proverbial pound of flesh, we have to act tonight. Go find Wynnie, and tell her to herd the humans. She has to keep them in the house. Her barking should keep them from getting very far.”

“Okay, and what are you gonna do?”

“I’m going to find Bundles and the others. We have to put our plan into action. Join us at the scarecrow post, after you’ve given Wynnie her instructions.”

“Fine. Bossy ass. I’ll do it.” She started to walk away, then turned, remembering something excitedly. “Oh yeah! I have another power too!”

“What’s that?”

“I can make the radio play Lady Gaga at will!”

“I think that’s just what the radio does on its own.” Scratch walked away. “Just be satisfied you finally have *one* power to use against the boy tonight.”

Patricia watched Scratch walk away, then she turned and headed to the house, where she’d last seen Wynnie. “Stupid cat ass mother fucker. If I had a stomach I’d fuckin’

eat that bossy ass hole. How'd he know how a car worked anyway? Bitch always went to the vet in a pillow case.”

“You shouldn’t have killed Mom!” Bundles was very distressed, and he spoke for the entire group.

“I’m afraid there was simply no other way,” Scratch defended himself, perched atop the post. “And now we have no choice but to put our full plan into high gear *tonight*.”

Bundles shook his downcast scarecrow head sorrowfully. “It’s too bad. That’s all. It’s just too bad.” He looked up. “What about Dad?”

“Dad’s fine,” Scratch assured him. He looked to the little dachshund, wagging her tail. “Isn’t that right, Patricia?”

“Yeah. Wynnies got him pinned by the car, in the kitchen. He went to go see what was wrong with Mom, and she trapped him there with the body, barking so he’s scared to move. She herded Timothy into his room on the bed. They’re both scared as fuck.”

“Good,” Scratch said, remembering his own final moments. “It’s as it should be. So, here’s the plan. I know it’s been a long night, and we may not tire, per say, but we can become...overtaxed. We’ve got a lot of work ahead of us, so how is everyone’s enthusiasm holding up?”

“I’m ready,” said Mr. Helmet.

“I can go as long as it takes. I’m used to this body now,” Bundles answered.

Mr. Whiskers just stared in terror at all the other ghosts around him.

Patricia jumped up and down. “I ain’t tired! I’m a *restless* spirit. I’m ready to dig up some shit!”

Everyone looked at her quizzically.

“It’s a figure of speech, y’all! *Seriously!*” Patricia shook her leg in laughter.

“All right then,” Scratch went on. “Mr. Helmet, you join Wynnie in the kitchen. The two of you *must* keep Dad from getting in our way while we deal with his horrid son. Mr. Whiskers, Bundles, you two need to get Timothy outside. Patricia...it’s great you have a power now, but I don’t see how sucking down batteries is of any use to us. You’ve already done your part. Be a cheerleader. Go wherever you want. And I will get the tractor and move it into position. Then, Bundles, you do what has to be done. Is everyone ready?”

The other ghosts, sans Mr. Whiskers, all cheered with readiness.

“Let’s do it,” crowed Mr. Helmet.

“I’m ready,” Bundles agreed.

Mr. Whiskers’ eyes grew even wider than normal, as he looked back and forth, from ghost to ghost, silently.

Patricia scratched at the ground ineffectively with her back paws. “Let’s go fuck some shit up!”

“All right. Then let’s get to it.” Scratch jumped from the post, and everyone headed towards the house.

Bundles moved through the hallway, followed by Mr. Whiskers and Patricia. He still carried the hatchet that had served him so well with Timothy’s friend earlier that night. When they came to Timothy’s door, Bundles stopped, collecting himself. “How do you think we should do this?”

Mr. Whiskers stared up at him, as if he were about to scream.

Patricia was more helpful. “I don’t know, bitch. Make an entrance!”

Bundles nodded. He looked at the door, then screamed out in an inhuman roar that the living could hear, and chopped at the door, as he forced it down in splinters before him. The spirits entered the room and found Timothy shivering on the bed, white faced with terror, holding himself in the fetal position and staring at the scarecrow like Mr. Whiskers.

“He ain’t gonna run,” Patricia said.

“I think this is what Scratch must have felt like, before the lawn mower hit him,” Bundles observed satisfactorily.

Patricia nudged the long-haired cat ghost with her snout, and the cat screamed terribly.

“Daaaaaaaamn, boy! I *knew* you could talk. Now go over to that scared little bitch and do your thing.”

Mr. Whiskers’ tail batted back and forth ferociously, and he jumped up onto the bed and started pinching Timothy mercilessly.

The boy moved, again and again, gasping out in pain whenever the cat’s invisible claws struck, but he didn’t let go of his knees. He didn’t leave the bed. He simply stared at the scarecrow, entranced by the visage of doom itself come to claim him for his acts of soulless villainy against his innocent pets.

“He’s not gonna budge,” Bundles murmured. “I think we scared him too *much*.”

“Or not enough.” Patricia leapt up onto the boy’s dresser and put a paw into his iPod hub.

Suddenly the room was filled with the loudest, creepiest Lady Gaga song the ghosts had ever heard.

Timothy jumped up to his feet with a scream. Bundles came after him with the hatchet, and the boy just kept screaming, running past the scarecrow and into the hallway. Bundles chased after him, leading him outside.

“Yeah, bitch! Show me your teeth!” Patricia cried out after him, as she danced on the dresser, endlessly pleased with herself.

Mr. Whiskers stared at her as though he’d gone catatonic.

In the kitchen, Dad stirred. “Son?” He heard the front door slam, and he got to his feet. He’d almost given up on his own sanity, as the ghostly dog barked whenever he moved, and he had no choice but to sit there and stare at his wife’s crushed remains.

Wynnie barked again, growling when he didn’t sit back down. “Uh-oh.” She looked to Mr. Helmet.

The cat made himself visible and began to run at the man.

Dad saw the cat, jumped in his skin, then gathered his strength. “No! Stay away from my son!” He walked right through the ghostly form of Mr. Helmet and then turned, noting his accomplishment. Wynnie barked and barked. The man ignored her, noting the bark was not accompanied by the least little bite. He started to run, and he ran straight out of the house to find his son.

“Well, crap,” Mr. Helmet said. “We tried.”

Wynn timer sighed. “Let’s follow him. At least see if we can keep him out of trouble while Bundles and Scratch kill his son.”

“Agreed.” And with that, they left the house to see what was to come of their efforts now that things had veered so unexpectedly from the plan.

Scratch saw the boy running from the house. He started the tractor, turned on the lights, and threw it into gear. He jumped from the pedals to the steering wheel until he had it lined up just the way he wanted it to go. He wanted to watch. He wanted to see Timothy’s comeuppance with his own eyes so intensely, but he knew he had to get down on the floorboard in order to make it happen. It was all up to Bundles now. He jumped down and pushed the gas pedal to the floor.

Bundles chased after Timothy, herding him, keeping him from getting too far away. He leapt over him, scared him back, threatened with the hatchet he had no intention of using on the boy of boys. He heard the tractor, saw it heading their way, and he knew the moment was at hand.

“No!”

Bundles turned to see Dad coming at him with a machete. He turned away from the boy and raised his hatchet to block the blade. Bundles didn't want this. Dad had always been so kind. He tried to make Dad stop, tried to knock the machete from his angry, determined grip, but the man kept on.

Finally, Dad managed to knock Bundles' arm back, finding an opening. He stabbed into the scarecrow's chest with his weapon, feeling victorious.

Bundles looked down at the machete in his chest. He looked at Dad. He looked to the tractor that had almost arrived in position for the final act of their macabre machinations. Conceiving of no other way to see things through to completion, Bundles took the moment of Dad's confusion over the scarecrow's failure to die, and he knocked Dad's head right off with one strong whack of the hatchet. As Dad's neck spurted out a geyser of blood, and his body hit the ground with a thud, Bundles tossed the hatchet into the darkness and turned on Timothy.

The boy was laughing now. Perhaps they'd broken him already. Confidently, the boy nodded to the scarecrow. "How are you gonna hurt me without your little axe?"

There was no sense that the boy was grieving in the least for his headless father. No sense of fear coming off of him at all. It hadn't been the horror that his friend had died

that had broken him earlier that night; it had been the horror of knowing that he might be next. The boy cared only for himself. He cared only that he would go on living and hurting weaker things. Pushing them. Not even the sound of the seemingly self-animated tractor seemed to unsettle him, now that the hatchet was gone.

“You’re nothing but wind and straw. I know why you want me. I know.”

As Bundles stared at the boy, biding his time, Alex approached, out of the shadows, running towards them, barking in his high-pitched puppy’s voice.

Timothy laughed, nodding towards the puppy. “I’m gonna do worse to him than I ever did to *Bundles*. And I’m gonna make you watch.”

The scarecrow moved so suddenly that the boy was off his feet before he even knew what had hit him. Bundles had stepped forward in a single fluid movement, pushing Timothy in the chest, sending him up and back, and into the path of the fast approaching tractor.

The boy turned to look, but the solitary instant he had remaining offered him far too little time to move. He started a scream, but it was never completed, as the tractor hit, and Timothy was torn to shreds.

Blood spattered all around like rain, as the tractor passed by. Bundles roared out in ecstasy, throwing back his

head, raising his arms to the sky, and laughing at the boy's well earned demise.

Scratch heard the triumphant sound and stopped the tractor.

All of the other ghosts had been watching in awe. They surrounded Bundles now, as he looked to the boy of boys' remains in reverent silence. The deed was done. Justice for the dead had prevailed at last.

Alex ran past them then, finding the boy dead in the field. He wasted no time, tail wagging excitedly, in making a meal of the meat and the blood.

"Damn!" Patricia ejaculated sharply. "That puppy is *fucked* up!"

"It's done," Bundles said, crossing his arms in satisfaction.

"So what now," asked Mr. Helmet.

"Now we rest," answered Scratch with a purr.

"I'm not sure I know how," protested Wynnie.

"I'm not sure that we *can*," added Bundles. He shrugged, actually indifferent. "The light is gone. The voices no longer beckon me. This is my place now. This is our home."

The daylight came. Bundles placed himself back on the post, tying the ropes, in case anyone came. And they did come. Police. Ambulances. The bodies were taken away. Days passed. Bundles remained in the scarecrow, watching. A sign was placed in front of the house. Weeks passed, then months, then years, and Bundles remained in the body of the scarecrow. Occasionally, he would catch the sound of boys in the woods, and he would get down from the post to break them, to stop them from hurting weaker things. And Alex grew. Alex was always there, in the woods, when Bundles ventured out, waiting to be fed his favorite meal.

After a time, an enormous truck pulled up to the house. The sign was taken down. People started to move furniture into the farm house. A family moved in. They had a boy, the same age as Timothy had been.

As the sun set, Bundles watched the boy shooting baskets on the pavement behind the house. The scarecrow began to untie the ropes, and Alex came out of the forest quietly and waited by his side. “Good dog,” Bundles said in his ghostly voice that only other ghosts could hear, and he lowered himself from the post.

About the Author

Glenn Slade Clark, Jr. is the author of eleven books, including the novel *Cry, Wolf: Shadow of the Werewolf*, the short fiction anthology *The Great Debate*, the Gothic horror series *The Chronicles of Nightfire, Texas*, and two fantasy series: *Metrognomes* and *The Legends of Nod*. He lives in Dallas, Texas, where he is currently hard at work on his next book.

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