

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a bright yellow sleeveless dress, stands with her back to the camera in a field of tall, dry, golden-brown grass. Her arms are outstretched to the sides, touching the stalks of the grass. The background is a clear, light blue sky. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

Sigmund  
Brouwer

The  
*Canary*  
List

A NOVEL

Sigmund  
Brouwer

The  
*Canary*  
List  
A NOVEL



WATERBROOK  
P R E S S

## Prologue



he knew that they hurt the boy, because he told her, always, the mornings after he was returned.

She was the only one the boy trusted. She was five and he was four. Each time he was returned to the house, it seemed he had grown smaller.

Black walls and candles, he said. Hoods and robes, like the scary people in Scooby Doo cartoons. Except it wasn't a cartoon. He couldn't describe what the people in hoods and robes did to him because he would start shaking and sobbing as he made the attempt.

He told her it must be something they ate that made them so mean to him.

*Hales.*

She didn't know what hales were and neither did he. But he told her about two pieces of wood crossed, and how they trampled it and kept repeating about the hales they had ate in, but he never knew what they ate the hales in, because they never finished explaining. They just said 'hales ate in' and left it at that.

On the last night she saw the boy, she was in his bedroom at the foster home. They heard the car drive up and looked out the window and saw it was them again. She had his toy bow and arrow set, and she vowed to the boy that she wouldn't let them take him again.

She was ready when the man in the mask came into the bedroom. She aimed the arrow at the eyes of the tall man, and the rubber suction cup of the toy arrow hit him squarely in his left eye. He cursed and lifted the mask and rubbed his eye before he realized that she was the one who had fired the arrow, not the boy. He dropped the mask into place and, with a snort of rage, stepped forward and swept her away with a blow across her face.

“I am The Prince,” he said, as she struggled to her knees. He moved to stand over her. “Bow to me.”

His face. She had seen it before. He was someone she saw at church on Sundays. In a robe at the front, handing out bread to people as they bowed down in front of him.

She did not want to bow.

Instead she rose in defiance and spit on his leg. He lashed out again, hitting her across the cheek. She tried to scream, but the pain was too great.

Another man in another mask stepped into the bedroom and pulled him away. Then they took the boy.

She never saw the boy again. He went to live at another house, the people at the house said.

But the man with the mask came back. He wore the mask while he hurt her again. In horrible ways. He promised if she told anyone, he could come back and kill her and then kill the people of the house.

So she didn't tell anyone. She tried to believe it was a dream. A very bad dream.

But some nights she would wake up and shiver and cry and wonder where the boy was. And she would wonder, too, what hales were and what they ate the hales in and how it was that hales could make people so horrible.

## One



evil hunted her.

It had driven her toward the beach, where, protected by the dark of night, Jaimie Piper crept toward the front window of a small bungalow a few blocks off the ocean in Santa Monica.

She knew it was wrong, sneaking up on her schoolteacher like this, but she couldn't help herself. She was afraid—really afraid—and she wanted his help. First she had to make sure he was alone. If he was with someone else, she wouldn't bother him.

The sound of night bugs was louder than the traffic on the main boulevard that intersected this quiet street. It was June, and the air was warm and had the tangy smell of ocean. The grass was cool and wet. She felt the dew soaking through her canvas high-top Converse sneakers. Jaimie wasn't one to worry about fashion. She just liked the way the sneakers felt and looked. Okay, maybe she liked them too because none of the other kids her age wore them.

Jaimie was twelve. Slender and tall, she had long, fine hair that she tended to wear in a ponytail with a ball cap. If she let it hang loose, it softened her appearance to the point where others viewed her as girlie, something she hated. The alternative was to cut it herself, because her foster parents didn't like wasting money by sending her to a beauty salon, but cutting it herself would just remind her that she was nothing but a foster kid, so she just let it grow. And wore Converse sneakers that looked anything but girlie.

Not only was it wrong to be sneaking up on her teacher's house, but it was wrong even to know where he lived. Jaimie knew that. But his wallet had been open on his desk once, with his driver's license showing behind a clear plastic

window, and she'd read it upside down while she was talking to him and had memorized his address.

Although this was the first time she'd stopped, she had ridden her bike past his house plenty of times, wondering what it would be like if she lived in the little house near the beach.

It wasn't the house that drew her. It was dreaming about what it would be like to have a family, and it seemed the perfect house for a family with a mom and a dad and a couple of girls.

A real family. A house that they had lived in for years and years, with a yard and a couple of dogs. Beagles. She loved beagles.

Her mom would be a little pudgy but someone who laughed all the time. Jaimie didn't like the moms she saw who were cool and hip and trying to outdo their daughters in skinniness and tight-fitting jeans.

Her dad would not have perfect hair and drive a BMW. Jaimie didn't have friends, because Jaimie wasn't a friend kind of person, but she knew girls at school with dads like that, and those girls didn't seem happy. If Jaimie had a dad, he'd be the kind of guy who went to barbers, not stylists, and had hair that was always a couple of weeks past needing a barber, who wore jeans and didn't tuck in his shirt and always dropped everything to listen to whatever story his girl wanted to tell him.

A dad like Mr. G, her teacher. He drove an old Jeep, the kind with canvas top and roll bars. Sometimes she'd see a surfboard strapped to the top of it, canvas top gone. Mr. G had that kind of surfer-dude look, with the long hair and a long nose bent a little. Not perfect kind of handsome, but a face you still looked at twice. Some of the girls in her class had a crush on him.

Not Jaimie.

She just wished she could have a dad like him and a house like the house he lived in. Sometimes when she was really lonely, she would ride her bike in the neighborhood, pretending it was her home and that when she got there, she'd be able to wheel up the sidewalk and drop her bike on the grass and leave

it there, because if it really was her family, no one would get upset about little things like that.

It wasn't that she just had a good feeling about him. It was that Jaimie knew Mr. G could be trusted. Jaimie had a sense about people, a sense that sometimes haunted her.

Like earlier tonight, when she'd met a guy who had come to her house to talk to her foster parents. She'd watched his eyes as he checked the layout of the house, standing in the kitchen, saying that he was from Social Services. She had taken her bracelet off to hand wash some dishes, and without it on her wrist, she'd felt the Evil that radiated from him. Evil that hunted her.

So while the man with Evil was talking to her foster parents, she'd grabbed her bracelet and snuck out of the house and jumped on her bike. Dusk was just turning black when she began the twenty-minute ride from the large old house toward the ocean, where she often snuck at night anyway to walk the beach.

But the feeling of Evil was still so real she couldn't shake it. She wanted—no, needed—to talk to someone about it. Wanted—no, needed—to feel safe. Somehow.

The one person who had promised to help wasn't answering her phone. That only left Mr. G. The only other person in the world she could trust.

She made it to the side of the window at his house. She inched her head up to peek through the glass.

She saw a single candle.

And Mr. G on the couch. Holding a big book open in his lap.

She watched, knowing she shouldn't watch.

It looked like he was talking to the book.

And then he glanced up, and for that split second, it seemed like he was staring right into her eyes.

## Two



Two hours into the one night of the year that Crockett Grey set aside to get as drunk as possible, he felt someone watching him and looked up to see his long-dead daughter peering in the window with, yes, a haunted look of desperation.

Crockett was only a quarter through a bottle of Laphroaig, still able to enjoy the single malt's peaty-smoky flavor roll over his tongue. Each sip still gave him a warming finish that deepened the intensity of sadness that came with missing Ashley, a blanket of grief that covered him daily, as he woke or began to sleep.

He would have preferred to get drunk every night, but that would have cheapened his grief and reduced memories of Ashley to a foggy haze. It would also have stopped him from being the best father possible for his son, Mickey. So as much as he wanted the crutch of alcohol, Crockett allowed himself to get drunk only one night a year, an anniversary that marked the horrible night when Ashley slipped away from him into the eternally black chasm. Nanna, the elderly widow next door, knew Crockett well enough to respect his solitude the day before, the day of, and the day after the anniversary of Ashley's death.

Crockett lived in a two-bedroom cottage he rented from Nanna, on a large lot in Santa Monica, a few blocks from the ocean, built just after the Second World War. The hardwood floor was not level, but the simplicity of the house suited him, and he had decorated it accordingly. Three times already, Nanna had turned down obscene offers from couples who wanted to knock down the house to build a McMansion among the palms that had been there for half a century; she didn't like change, and she liked having Crockett as a neighbor.



She and Crockett had become friends while he helped her with yard work and house maintenance.

He sat at the corner of a black leather couch, with the bottle of Laphroaig and a large flickering candle on the table beside him. The candlelight was not manly; he knew it and didn't care. Couldn't have a vigil without candlelight. In his lap was the photo album.

He sipped at the scotch, testing the sensation on his tongue. He knew from the year before, and from the year before that, when he could no longer detect the smokiness, he'd be one stage closer to passing out.

By the candlelight, he saw one of the rare photos of him with his ex-wife, Julie. Most were of Ashley or Ashley with Julie. Not Mickey; he hadn't been born yet. Crockett had been designated family photographer, which made him largely invisible in the accumulated years of memories.

It was a beach photo. Crockett remembered the day, on the beach at Paradise Cove, north of Santa Monica on the Pacific Coast Highway. A passerby had offered to take the picture. Crockett was sitting on a towel in swimming trunks and a hooded sweatshirt. The wind threw grains of sand against his skin, tugging at his hair. He had cared enough about vanity then that he was proud to wear his hair long, not indifferent to it like now. Julie had been on a beach chair beside him. Her hair fine and cinnamon, tanned lean legs, and a flat belly. In a bikini, Julie drew second and third glances, even when she held Ashley, who then was just beyond toddler, chasing gulls all day in the cove. Here and now, some eight years after the photo had been taken, candlelight made it difficult to see any of the photos with precision—that was the point of candlelight—but Crockett knew what brightness of day would reveal in the photo. Both of their faces locked in a timeless moment by the camera lens, faces that showed no awareness that the future held anything but joy.

Then he saw Ashley at the window. Long hair and wide eyes. A shimmering image that forced him to blink.

The face was still there.

At first, he felt disbelief.

Then the insanity of hope. Except when he stood to run toward the ghost, he knocked over the candle along with his glass of Laphroaig.

By the time he'd managed to right both, the image of his long-dead daughter at the window had disappeared.

## Three



andlelight cast gargoyle-like shadows that were barely visible on the black painted walls in the small room. The celebrants wore pointed hoods to conceal their faces. Anyplace else and any other time, this would have been a parody of the grotesque.

But this was not playacting.

Ten of them. Breathing and sharing hot, humid air, which added to the heightened sense of the forbidden.

The celebrant, the priest, wore over his robe a chasuble with the Sigil of Baphomet—an inverted pentagram. Starting from the lowest point and reading counterclockwise around the five points of the pentagram were the Hebrew letters LVTHN that represented Leviathan, the beast of Satan.

Beside him, the thurifer, who swung the chain connected to a metal canister that burned incense on a hot piece of charcoal. And beside him, the illuminator, who held a single lit candle for the reading of the texts.

The remaining light came from candles at the altar, beside an upside-down cross. Near the upside-down cross was a chalice of blood, and beside that, a rough loaf of black bread.

The scent of that burning incense added to the swelling sensation of the atmosphere, and the Black Mass began, as a gong sounded, and the celebrant intoned:

*In nomine Magni Dei Nostri Satanus. Introibo ad altare Domini Inferi.*

Madelyne Mackenzie was among the ten in the congregation at this, the witching hour. With them, she responded:

*Ad eum qui laefificat meum.*

The celebrant said:

*Adjutorium nostrum in nomine Domini Inferi.*

Then Madelyne and the others, in the hushed tones of heightened awareness:

*Qui regit terram.*

Madelyne knew what was coming next and kept her hooded head bowed as the words filled the room, seeming to swirl with the smoke of the incense.

“Before the mighty and ineffable Prince of Darkness,” the priest said, his voice somehow soothing and rumbling and erotic all at once. “And in the presence of all the dread demons of the Pit, and this assembled company, I acknowledge and confess my past error. Renouncing all past allegiances, I proclaim that Satan-Lucifer rules the earth, and I ratify and renew my promise to recognize and honor him in all things, without reservation, desiring in return his manifold assistance in the successful completion of my endeavors and the fulfillment of my desires. I call upon you, my brothers, to bear witness and to do likewise.”

With incense swirling through the candlelight in ghostlike vapors, the congregants shivered and exhaled in anticipation.

That’s when Madelyne felt the vibration.

It could have been interpreted by the others as a shared visceral reaction to the calling of demons to witness how the next moments of worship would unfold at the altar, but Madelyne knew differently.

The vibration was nothing darkly spiritual.

Instead, it was a cell phone. Strictly forbidden. And strapped to the softness of her inner thigh by a wide band, well hidden beneath the robe. Inconceivable that she would answer it.

Each vibration sent a rush of adrenaline through her body. Intellectually, she knew no one in the room would notice. Emotionally, however, she suddenly felt as if she were the woman exposed on the altar.

No one around her shifted or stirred, however, and she prepared herself for what held this small congregation in thrall.

The impending ritual of sacrifice.

## Four



Two homeless women found Jaimie Piper at the phone booth, just after midnight, only a half hour after she had ridden her bicycle away from the small bungalow that she knew would never be a home for someone like her.

The tattered women, undernourished from years of drug abuse, looked like lepers.

Jaimie backed away as the two of them tried to crowd her with zombielike certainty toward the massive pilings of the Santa Monica pier, where she had been killing time while waiting for Dr. Mackenzie to answer her phone. Jaimie had called the number four times already. Dr. Mackenzie had promised Jaimie that she would always answer no matter what. Except when no-matter-what had arrived, all Jaimie got was voice mail.

And now she had these homeless women to worry about.

They showed no sense of excitement as they closed in on her just beyond the beams of a security light; these creatures were souls in bodies that had long ago given up on the luxury of anticipated pleasure.

They didn't waste energy on the enjoyment of threats either. Hawks in the air shriek to startle their prey; vultures descend in unified slow circles to pluck and tear at their leisure.

One of them cackled and lunged for Jaimie's arm. Her clawing fingers grasped Jaimie's bracelet, and she pulled hard, as if expecting a snap. But this bracelet was a band of curled, smooth metal. It slipped away from Jaimie so effortlessly, that the momentum of her pull startled the woman, and the

bracelet flew from her fingers and bounced across the pavement, clanging against the side of the Dumpster.

The bracelet didn't drop but clung to the metal. Jaimie felt the hunter again, as if Evil had flowed from the man at her foster home into the second homeless woman, who began shaking as if she were having an epileptic fit. She screeched unintelligible words and her hands darted in erratic circles, aimed at Jaimie.

At the woman's touch, it seemed to Jaimie like a blue arc of electricity crossed between them.

"You!" Jaimie said. "I know who you are!"

The homeless woman was one of the people who Dr. Mackenzie had talked about, people who caused Jaimie's horrible feelings of darkness. Jaimie hated those feelings. She hated Evil.

Since her meetings with Dr. Mackenzie, Jaimie had begun to wear a crucifix on a chain around her neck. She held it up in front of her and began a chant, the way that Dr. Mackenzie had taught her to deal with Evil.

*Padre nostro, che sei nei cieli, sia santifico il tuo nome...*

The homeless woman gave an unearthly snarl and lurched forward to claw at Jaimie's face. But she was old and uncoordinated and probably more than a little drunk. Jaimie ran as hard as she could into the woman's body, catching a whiff of stench, and spun past her, sprinting to safety on the beach.

From a safe distance, she watched. The homeless women were too broken to chase her.

Eventually, they moved on, hyenas scuttling sideways back into the darkness.

She waited until she knew they were gone, then returned to the Dumpster. The bracelet clung to it as if glued there. She pulled it loose and slipped it on her wrist.

Evil was continuing to stalk her.

She knew it. She didn't know if she'd be able to make it through the night.

Jaimie was shaking again.

She wanted what she'd felt at the window of the small bungalow.

Calm and peace. And the knowledge that Evil could not touch her there because of how good the man inside the house was.

## Five



W

hen Crockett again saw his dead daughter peering through his window, the vision came with a rapping of knuckles against the glass.

By then Crockett had managed to reduce the Laphroaig by another half, and he was quietly weeping, engaged in imaginary conversations with Ashley. A few times in this drunken monologue, he'd included Mickey, his five-year-old son, as if Mickey were there too. Introducing Mickey into the imaginary conversation would reduce Crockett to hiccups of weeping. So amazing to be the dad of a little boy, but why, God, couldn't Crockett also still be the daddy of a little girl?

When the knocking on the window sounded, Crockett had already set aside the photo album with reverence, leaving it open on the coffee table. He had a box for it, and in the morning, it would go into the box, and the box would go into the attic. For another year.

On the couch, as the candle's wax spilled onto the floor, he had allowed himself to roam through memories, letting the tears spill without wiping them away, allowing the sensation of bitterness that he tried to keep at bay the rest of the year.

Bitterness.

Crockett had always believed that he was laid-back by inclination, but twelve years earlier, becoming the father of a beautiful girl had introduced him to the unpleasantness of a worry list. Worries that she'd run out on the street at the wrong time. Worries, for crying out loud, that if he didn't clean the lint from the dryer screen, it might catch on fire and he'd be unable to rescue her from a



burning house. The list was a long one, but well worth the trade-off—it was there because he loved his daughter beyond life.

Nothing dramatic had taken her. Just an on-off switch in a protein in a cell somewhere in her body that triggered the insidious attack of cancer. All his worries had consisted of items that, if he was vigilant enough, he could prevent. He was her daddy, but he'd been helpless to protect his little girl from the real enemy.

A year after she'd died, a sheet of newspaper had blown into Crockett's face while he was sitting cross-legged on the sand at the beach, head bowed. Not in prayer. Anything but that. The sun was bright, and his eyes needed a break from staring at the ocean water. He was in that out-of-body state between consciousness and sleep, barely aware of sweat trickling between his shoulder blades.

A gust had thrown the paper into his face with a snap and naturally startled him.

A small headline had grabbed his attention as he began to crumple the page.

“Baby falls from five-story balcony.”

*That's what the media does,* he thought. *Draws us in with the misery of others. Who wouldn't read a story about someone who backed up his SUV and ran over his own child in his own driveway? Something to cluck about by the water cooler, a way to feel righteous that you wouldn't be that careless when it came to something as precious as your children.*

Or the media drew people in with that other great mesmerizer. Fear. Threatened them with embedded headline words like *might, could, possible.*

There had been a time in Crockett's life when he dismissed each of those threats with counter phrases. *Might not. Could not. Possibly not.* Back when he'd point out that the number of good deeds in a single day outnumbered the bad headline deeds by such an incredible percentage that it was only an illusion that the world was a horrible place to live and getting worse every year.

On the beach, snapped out of drowsiness, he would have continued crumpling the paper, except for the smaller headline underneath. “Firefighters express disbelief at baby's survival.”

The back of the baby's diaper had first caught on a spike of a high fence that surrounded the building. That slowed the fall enough that when the baby landed on his butt, the diaper, totally full, had literally exploded like an airbag, cushioning his impact.

Others might have found it funny, the image of a shower of baby poop, with a happy baby unscathed in the center of the mess. Others might have found a measure of joy, imagining a relieved mother lifting the baby to give thanks for divine intervention.

Not Crockett. The article had just made him bitter. What were the odds? First that the spike snagged the back of the diaper, instead of impaling the poor child. And then the baby landing butt first.

This capriciousness was a result of external actions imposed on the child. How about the capriciousness of a gene programmed from conception to lurk for years inside a little girl—his little girl—until it begins a blossom of death? Someone explain that.

Crockett didn't believe in heaven or any of the other platitudes; laughing and crying with Ashley in the altered reality of drunkenness was as close as he could come to accepting any resurrection of his daughter.

Mournfully drunk and immersed in memories, he took another sip of scotch. With his eyes closed, he saw Ashley outlined against the fireplace in her much-too-small flannel Dora the Explorer pajamas she wouldn't give up. He listened to Ashley lisp her way through a Christmas song, during that all-too-short period between losing her front teeth and growing new ones.

Then came the knocking at the front window that sent Ashley hopelessly out of reach. Crockett's first reaction was drunken fury at the intrusion, an anger that drove him to his feet and sent him to the window with the candle in his hand.

But what he saw in the light of the flame was Ashley—for the second time that evening—her face framed by the long, straight hair that he had once enjoyed watching his wife brush.

The main level of the house was set above a crawlspace, so in the window the girl's shoulders were barely above the bottom of the window frame. Feeling like he was spinning, Crockett knelt, so that his eyes were level with the girl's. He stared, trying to shake off the juxtaposition of this face against the one he'd been clinging to. He took a swig of his scotch, nearly emptying the bottle.

This time the face didn't vanish.

Instead, the face stared back. Blurry. And he finally realized the long, straight hair belonged to someone else.

"Mr. G, it's me, Jaimie."

Jaimie Piper. One of his ABC students from a class of seventeen whom he had prodded and cajoled and defended from the bureaucracy for the previous ten months. Crockett taught the ABC kids in the upper-elementary school. Twelve-year-olds. Adaptive Behavior Classroom. A labeled classroom filled with kids with labels. ADD, ADHD, and the rest of the initials that were in fashion these days.

No way would he share his evening with Jaimie, Crockett told himself. It was the end of the school year. His responsibilities went only so far.

"I'm scared," Jaimie said, her voice muffled by the glass. She brought her hands up, placed her palms against the window in supplication. "I need you."