

**STEVE STRED**  
FOUR DARK TALES  
FEATURING

**EATEN**

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**ABRAHAM, LOOK  
TO THE SKY**

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**THE TOOTH  
COLLECTOR**

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**THE NAVAJO  
NIGHTMARE**

**Steve Stred**

**4 Dark Tales**

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## Welcome

Hello! Welcome to this fun free pdf of four of my tales!

This release is a thank you for all of the readers and reviewers support in my short, fledgling literary journey. It's also a great way to see if you want to check out my world of bleak, dark horror. This release is being done in conjunction with my release of *The Girl Who Hid in the Trees*. A terrifying coming-of-age novella revolving around an urban legend. So far the feedback and pre-release reviews have been amazing and I'm stunned seeing all the kind words.

So, what's in store for you here? Well four dark tales! But you figured that out from the title right 😊.

Each tale tells a fun, frightening story within, and I'll introduce each beforehand.

Now as a side note – I have actually set up a Goodreads spot for this guy! I figured this would be a fun spot for folks to leave a review on this if they so pleased. Reviews mean the world to us smaller, indie authors and as this is a super-fast read, and not costing you anything, it would be amazing if you could do me a favour and let me know how you like it!

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/43564474-four-dark-tales>

Now, are you ready to start? Good. Look the door, dim those lights, get the dog or cat up beside you and tuck your feet into the blankets. While I may have written down some horror for you to enjoy, you just never know what's going to interrupt your reading!

Steve

Edmonton, Canada, January 2019

## Story #1 – Eaten.

Eaten originally appeared as a bonus story in my December 2018 release *Dim the Sun*. That is an ebook only dark poetry collection. It's still available and will always be only \$0.99. All profits/proceeds from the collection go directly to my good friend Rob Derman, who is attempting to qualify for Canada in the next Winter Olympics in the sport of Skeleton. I'm contemplating actually doing a physical release for it, so we'll see.

As for the story itself, it's set in my childhood home in Burton. I have a number of stories featuring this setting; *The Stairs*, *Edge of the Woods*, *The Call*, and this one *Eaten*. I think a lot of those stories have been done simply because it's a super small town, and I always felt a bit isolated. I was the only boy in the family and I spent a lot of time playing on my own, in the woods, using my imagination to build these fantastic worlds.

*Eaten* started off as a story from one thought I had, that turned into a single line.

'Imagine having to lay quietly while a sibling was devoured directly beside you.'

Then I let my dark, twisted imagination take off.

I frequently use my friend's names in my stories, and in this story I reference both my great friend Pat, whom I miss every single day since we moved from BC. He's one of the best people on this planet. The other one is my buddy Mason McDonald. If that name sounds familiar, it's because he's also a talented indie author, but has become my go-to cover artist. He's done the covers for *Dim the Sun*, *Wagon Buddy*, *YURI*, *Left Hand Path*, the re-do of *Invisible*, *The Girl Who Hid in the Trees* and the nice little cover image for this collection! Enjoy!

## Eaten

You ever have to lay there, quietly, while your loved one is eaten beside you?

The sound of the muscle ripping, the gristle holding fast to the bone, sawing its way into your ears.

You have to lay there, still as can be, otherwise the creature will pick up your scent and decide you are worthy of eating as well.

I have.

Twice.

The first time was in 1989. I was 8 years old and the world was just beginning to expand before my eyes. My parents had moved us to a two story house when I was 6. It was massive in comparison to the trailer that we previously lived in and the idea of us kids each having our own rooms was exciting.

At the time, I was far too young to think about why my parents were able to get the house so cheap. Granted we lived in a small town, in the middle of nowhere, so there wasn't a booming real estate market, but my parents were able to buy the house for less than what the trailer sold for.

I remember the move happening on a weekend and us kids; my two younger sisters and I, beyond amazed that the base of the mountain was in our backyard. We immediately ran through the trees behind the house and made our way to the back fence. Our eyes were

met with boulders of various sizes and our imaginations went through the roof. We had the best playground known to man, and it was right here, at the back of our property.

Our parents were pretty hands off for our play time. This was an age before cell phones and internet, and so we would head outside after school and play until the street lights came on. During the summers we would spend our entire day outside, only coming in for food and if it poured rain.

The summer of 1989 brought some changes unexpectedly. The first was that my father's logging job moved, which required him to stay in camp. Normally he would leave really early in the morning and would be back at night for dinner. Now he was only home during the weekends. The second was, my mother got a part time job working at the general store. This meant during the days we had a babysitter, and for us that was the best news ever. A babysitter wasn't as strict as our parents and a babysitter didn't know what we were allowed to do and not do.

To this end, me and my friends would play longer and longer at the base of the mountain. Our babysitter didn't care and didn't check up on us much.

One day while playing in our normal area, between two boulders and around some fallen trees, my friend Pat got his leg stuck. He was goofing off and fell between some rocks.

"Mason, run and get help," I cried, scared that we were going to be in deep trouble. Mason quickly left, and I tried to help Pat free himself, but I was too weak to make a difference. I couldn't budge him.

“Are they going to have to cut my leg off?” Pat asked, lips quivering.

“Probably,” I replied, trying to make it a joke. It didn’t help. Tears began to flow from his eyes. Then a noise from behind us caught my attention.

“Pat, I think there’s something near us,” I whispered, worried about what big animals might be lurking.

“Oh no! Do you think it’s a bear? Get me free, please, please,” he begged.

It was then that I noticed the clouds travelling quickly, blocking out the sun, throwing us into a darkness.

I knelt down beside Pat, thinking my tiny frame could act as a shield against whatever beast attacked.

From the gloom a figure emerged. Looming over us, its features were obscured by a thick fog that rolled in. It reached forward and with a rapid flick of its wrist, pulled Pat from the crevice and set him down on the ground beside me.

“Oh thank you, thank you,” Pat gleefully exclaimed.

The figure nodded a quick nod, acknowledging his thanks.

I could hear Mason and our babysitter calling out for us through the blackened trees. I turned to look at the figure and already it had moved away into the darkness, disappearing from view.

“Pat that was amazing! Was that a bear? Pat? What’s wrong?”

Pat was frozen, staring straight forward, as though suddenly paralyzed.

From deep within his belly a voice erupted from his mouth, a voice so filthy I felt my skin crawl.

“You and your friends have always been welcomed in my area. Today you have strayed too far. You have invited trouble into my territory. But now a favor has been given and a return must be granted. Tonight. Tonight I will collect.”

Then Pat’s eyes glazed over and he dropped to the ground as the babysitter and Mason arrived.

It took a few minutes, but Pat came around. It worried me that he had no recollection of the figure, getting his leg stuck or any of the things he had said. I was most worried though about what this figure had said about collecting.

\*

That night my mom didn’t understand why I wouldn’t go to sleep. I couldn’t tell her. Once she fell asleep, I went and woke up my sister. I told her what had happened and she didn’t believe me. She was only a year younger than I was, but back then she was already wiser than I was. I convinced her to sleep in my room. There was no chance I would be able to sleep on my own.

It didn’t take long until I drifted off, comforted by the presence of another human.



\*

I was dragged from my dreams sometime in the night to the sounds of someone slapping wet socks against the floor. I sat up in bed and started to rub my eyes when I realized someone or *something* else was in the room with me and my sister.

I immediately dropped back into a laying position and pulled the blankets all the way over my head, thinking maybe that would be a perfectly useable defense against the intruder.

I couldn't speak, couldn't breathe. Was my sister ok?

I moved slowly and softly and lifted a small part of my blanket up, trying to see if I could make out what was in my room. My eyes had adjusted to the darkness and what I saw was straight from the depths of hell itself.

A hellhound was devouring my sister. It was a massive beast, thick muscles on its haunches, with thin skin covering its body. It had a long snout, massive fangs and tiny, beady eyes. Its ears were small and triangular, as though they had been clipped short and a long thick patch of fur ran the length of its spine, ending at the tip of its little nub tail. It had ripped open her stomach and was sucking her innards into its mouth, its snout plastered with her stomach lining. Her head was rolled to the side and her wide open, dead eyes stared at me. I couldn't stop looking at her eyes, it was as though she was saying *'this is your fault, this is because of you.'*

I tried not to scream. I tried to lay as still as possible. This wasn't the figure from the mountain, this must have been one of its "pets" sent forth from the depths of the inferno to collect.

Once it was done with my sister, leaving her outer shell behind, it sat back on its haunches and sniffed the air. I could see saliva and blood dripping from its jaws. Then a horn blasted through the night air and I knew it was being summoned back to its master.

It started towards the door of my room before turning and looking directly at me. Its eyes danced with the light of a thousand flames and I knew its master was watching me through the beast's eyes.

Then it was gone and I just stayed lying on my bed staring at the ceiling. It wasn't until the morning that my mother found us. She screamed and cried and grabbed my sister, but nothing was going to bring her back. I didn't move, having pissed and shit myself during the night. My limbs simply failed to function and I couldn't move or talk.

\*

Life moved in a blur for some time after.

My parents blamed me, and I was institutionalized in the city. I still wasn't speaking or moving except to chew my food when fed. My parents came to visit me, but that slowed over the years, finally stopping altogether.

On my twentieth birthday my youngest sister visited me for the first time. I didn't recognize her at all, but she looked like we could be related. She told me that my dad had died and that my mom wasn't doing so well. She begged me to get better, that she needed me and that it wasn't my fault.

Her words had some sort of magic to them. Something stirred. I felt different. It shouldn't have affected me, but it did.

Over the next year, I started learning to speak again, my voice weak and fragile. But speech therapy helped fix that. During that time period I went full force into physiotherapy and by the end of the year I was walking short distances with a walker and on my twenty second birthday I ran for the first time since I was eight.

The doctors all agreed at my annual assessment; it was time for me to leave. They were stunned with my turnaround and my recovery, and all agreed it was bordering on a miracle, but they were all elated to see me leave.

My life came at me fast and furious after. I left the hospital, got an apartment, got a job, went back to school, got my high school diploma and then attended college. I fell in love, got married, had kids, got divorced, and reconnected with my mom.

Reconnecting with my mom was difficult and awkward. She felt guilty for putting me away in a facility, she felt awful for blaming me for my sister's death and she knew it was time for forgiveness.

I was able to introduce her to her grandkids and got to know my other sister a little bit.

But this entire time, I knew a black cloud was hanging over my head, and I just wasn't sure why.

\*

A decade later, I was torn from my sleep by the sound of my cellphone ringing. I answered it to find the panicked voice of my sister. My mother had died. That night she had been driving home from a friend's house and lost control on an icy section of road. The car left the highway and careened down a bank. She didn't survive.

Unbeknownst to me, at some point, the last will and testament of my mom had been changed to leave the house to me. I was confused. Why? I had moved away after my institutionalization and now to be left this house made no sense to me.

So I made an agreement with my sister. We would clean all of the stuff out of the house, she could keep what she wanted, and she would buy the house from me for the tidy sum of \$1. We signed off on an agreement and would get to work on the house shortly after my mom's funeral.

The funeral was strange to me. I hadn't attended my dad's funeral, so watching everyone say goodbye to my mom was both tough and exhausting. I felt fortunate though, because I was able to get a glimpse into her life. A life I missed out on.

After the funeral we all retreated back to the house, and at some point, when I became overwhelmed with the number of random people giving me their condolences, I found myself in the backyard staring up at the mountain.

My sister joined me and we got to chatting.

"You ever play back there, after, you know, she died?" I asked.

"Nope. Mom and dad never let us go back there, ever again. Her death was blamed on a wild animal so they were not taking any chances."

\*

When the time came to clean out the house, my sister and I soon discovered it was going to be a bigger job than we had expected. We made quick work of the basement, throwing away almost all of the

stuff down there, into the big bin out front. At the end of day one we found ourselves exhausted and ready to fall asleep on our feet.

“I haven’t slept in this house since that night,” I said, realizing the enormity of what was to come.

“We don’t have to stay here if you don’t want.”

“Nah, I don’t mind,” I replied, trying to act brave. Inside I was filled with fear and anxiety.

Living in the city had zapped my memory of just how quickly it got dark at night, with limited street lights and no skyscrapers around. It was unsettling, but my overworked body didn’t care. I fell asleep on the couch while we watched some TV.

At some point in the night I woke up and struggled to remember where I was. After it came back to me, I made my way to the kitchen and got a glass of water. I stood drinking it while staring out into the backyard, looking at the tree’s by the mountain.

It took me a second, but I realized that something was back there. Something was moving through the yard. My heart started pumping like crazy and I was scared that this thing back there would hear it, would find me.

I closed my eyes, rubbing them, trying to make sure it wasn’t my imagination playing tricks on me. When I opened them again, the thing was closer and I let out a sigh of relief. It was just a deer.

I chuckled to myself as I fell back asleep on the couch.

\*

The next day my back was killing me. My sister surmised it was because of my sleep on the couch and told me that I would be sleeping that night on the bed and that she would take the couch.

We made great progress again that day, cleaning out the other two bedrooms, the old pantry room and the laundry room. My sister was going to get rid of the washer and dryer, but for now we left it in place.

As dark descended on us that evening, we sat outside on the deck, watching the sun set and chatting about how crazy life was. I typically didn't drink alcohol, but my sister had a few coolers and the cold beverage was divine that night, helping to release some of the tightness in my muscles. Once again the strain got to me and that night, I fell asleep sitting in the patio chair outside. My sister left at some point and decided to sleep in the bed.

My dreams were vivid that night. I dreamed of my dead sister, chasing her through the trees. I dreamed of my friends Mason and Pat, two people I had never seen again after that night. I dreamed of my childhood dog and felt him licking my face, telling him to stop, just stop and then I woke up. It took me a second before I realized I was outside and that my face was covered in saliva. *Something* had been licking my face.

I rushed into the house and went directly into the bedroom. My sister was sleeping on the bed, snoring lightly. I was relieved. I decided I would use the floor beside the bed to finish my sleep, not wanting to wake her or sleep on that uncomfortable couch again.

I had just gotten myself comfortable on the floor beside the bed, when I sensed a presence in the doorway. Looking over, I spotted the darkened shape of the figure from the woods, so many years ago. I

then watched as the hellhound padded into the room and headed straight towards my sister. My eyes were locked on the eyes of the figure, who I could tell was grinning, even though I couldn't see its mouth, or any facial features.

I stayed as still as I possible could, as the beast began to devour my other sister. History was repeating itself and I knew this time, I needed to act. I was about to jump up when a hard pressure on my chest pushed me down. Looking up, the figure was standing over me, one giant foot preventing me from moving.

The sounds of bones breaking, innards bursting and blood splatting on the floor started to make the room spin and I realized I was vomiting before I could turn my head. I started choking and coughing, the thick fluid plugging my mouth and throat. The figure let me roll over and I went immediately onto all fours, spitting out the chunks and bile.

Then I felt licking on my face again. The hellhound was slobbering me with its tongue, bits of my sister being spread all over my face.

"Awe, ain't that sweet. Precious here seems to have a liking of you." The figure then began to laugh, a sound deep within its belly.

"We are all done now here. You have paid up."

The two of them left me alone in the room with my dead sister once again.

The last thing I remembered was someone screaming and screaming. It was me.

\*

“So that’s why I am back here. I don’t want to live in an institution, but I can’t walk and I have no one to take care of me. As far as I know they demolished my parents’ house. I just don’t have options.”

It frustrated me that the walls never spoke back. Group therapy? Not when you are alone in a padded cell. My meals these days were spoon fed to me by the nurse. I never killed my sisters, the figure directed that hellhound to do it. Still I couldn’t help feeling like a criminal. Locked away from the world.

I knew one day the figure would visit me again. When it did, the noises I would hear would be the sounds of my own body being devoured. Until then I would just sit here and count the days, chatting with the padded walls before me.

END



## Story #2 – Abraham, Look to the Sky.

This quick story is maybe the first time I've written anything that could be considered cosmic horror. Maybe not? I'm honestly not too sure, as some of my releases walk a very fine line and could be perceived as cosmic horror. Either way, this one is a straight forward cosmic horror tale.

I came up with this during the Christmas break. One night I was lying in bed, not able to sleep. I currently co-sleep with my son, so I had my phone within reach and while he snoozed, cuddled up to me using my right arm as a pillow, I emailed myself draft #1. The idea came from the sky above. I couldn't tell you why it popped into my head. It just did haha! I had this picture of an old man staring at a corn field, while above him the clouds churned. So fifteen minutes later, draft #1 was done and emailed to myself. Few small tweaks and voila, here you go.

So please enjoy 'Abraham, Look to the Sky.'

This is also the first short story included in the back of *The Girl Who Hid in the Trees*, which releases February 28, 2019.

## Abraham, Look to the Sky

"How long you says he's been sitting there?"

Zack took a second, spit out a wad of chew through the open pick-up window and looked out at the fields beyond.

"Mah says'sm going on twenty years least. Say'sm he's convinced the sky gonna go dark, that heaven's gonna turn tah hell, and then we's done for," he replied, listening to the trucks engine clatter. The RPM gauge worked decently well, so when Zack saw the needle popping up and down between five hundred RPM's to three thousand and back, he knew it was past time to get some work done on it.

He knew he also wanted to feel Hazel's massive set of jugs again, so when she asked to drive out to see the old man sitting at the t-intersection in exchange for whatever he wanted, he readily agreed.

Now here they sat. To their right; cornfield. Fifty acres of Jeremiah's finest. Still months from harvesting, but it was all Zack could do to not jump out, rip a cob off and just eat it raw. Jeremiah often bragged about his farming prowess, and for once Zack wasn't going to call the man out for making up some bullshit.

Straight ahead; the dirt road. It stretched out for another twelve miles before it crossed over into the states jurisdiction and became paved.

To their left; the other section of dirt road. It travelled away, surrounded by wheat fields and cows.

And sitting there facing the corn field was old man Abraham.

He had hauled a wooden chair out to the intersection years before the red stop sign had even been installed.

Now he sat, day in and day out, long piece of wheat sticking out of his cracked lips. His cowboy hat was three sizes too big and his jean overalls hung loosely around his leather-bound frame.

Having never worn a shirt a day in his life, the sun had done a number on his skin.

But there he sat. Whether kids raced by him, spraying him with dust or rocks, whether the ladies from the church brought him lemonade and begged him to repent his sinful thoughts, he sat. Abraham wasn't moving for no one.

As he daydreamed about the crazy old man, Zack heard the passenger door close and he realized Hazel had exited the truck. She was now walking towards the senior.

"Ah, fuck a duck," he exclaimed as he climbed out, not even taking the time to turn the truck off.

As he jogged to catch up, he heard Hazel start to talk to the old man.

"Hey mister, whatcha doing?"

Abraham turned and studied her for a minute. Zack thought she'd make quite a study. Forty years old, straggly bleach blonde hair, eight kids from eight daddies, her stomach hanging out from the bottom of her tank top, looking like it might devour her short jean skirt. Hazel had already removed her dentures in the truck, prepping for some fun with Zack, so now her words were terse when spoken.

"Hey mister, don't mean ya no harm. Just curious about you sitting here in the sun's all."

At this Zack saw the man's body relax and he turned to look at the duo.

"Doing my wife's bidding, if you two must know. See's that there?" He pointed to the clear, cloudless blue sky above. They both nodded.

"Just before she died and cancer claimed another one of its victims she said, 'Abraham, look to the sky. For when the world ends the beasts will come from above.' So now's I wait. They're a comin', I'm sure of that."

Then ole Abraham turned back to the corn, leaving Hazel and Zack with their mouths hanging open.

When they got back in the truck, Zack finally spoke.

"Well, there it is. He's crazy. I didn't the stories were true but..."

Hazel began to rapidly shake Zack's arm, getting his attention.

"What the fuck woman?" He asked but then saw what she was pointing at.

Old man Abraham was now kneeling on the dirt road, arms extended above, as though waiting on an angelic hug.

"The sky..." Hazel whispered, still shaking his arm, "It's turning black."

Zack craned his neck over to see what she was yammering on about and sure enough, the once pristine sky was now completely covered in the darkest, thickest clouds Zack had ever seen.

"We need to leave," he said, but didn't move. They sat there as the sky opened up and the first rain in two months fell upon them. They didn't move when Abraham stripped naked and began to 'bathe' himself with gravel, making his thin skin slice open and bleed. And they didn't leave when the lightning began to pierce the clouds and then stab the land all around them.

Zack thought Mother Nature was putting on quite the show. Then Hazel began to scream. She screamed so loudly the rear-view mirror cracked and Zack was convinced his ear nearest her had burst. Hazel screamed to such an extent that her voice box shredded and blood poured forth from her mouth, drenching her shirt and cleavage.

Zack didn't care. For he was fixated on what Hazel was screaming at.

The clouds above Abraham, the nude, bleeding nut-job had parted. From that opening a dozen massive tentacles had descended, the enormous, round suckers flexing and opening, searching for contact.

When they finally arrived at Abraham, he embraced their communion, even as the thick hook within punctured his body.

As the man was hoisted skyward Zack simply sat, staring in disbelief, Abraham's screams growing quiet as he ascended.

The man's wife had been right. And as the skies opened and more and more tentacles came to end the world, Zack looked to the sky as well. Zack looked for his saviour to come and pluck him from obscurity.

END

### Story #3 – The Tooth Collector.

This tale is the second short story that appears after *The Girl Who Hid in the Trees*. I submitted this to a few spots and unfortunately neither place snagged it. Oh well!

This story fills two voids. The first was that it filled a twisted fairy tale void in my literature. I always wanted to write a bit of my own take on those childhood stories we grow up reading.

The second was that it fills a gap in my own writing timelines. I have a number of characters that appear and co-mingle within my short story world and even as far back as *Jane: The 816 Chronicles*. So this is a short story that ties together some stuff from *Left Hand Path: 13 more tales of black magick* and leads into my novel out at the end of the year *The Stranger*. You can read this story without having read any of my other stuff, which is great, but for those who have, you'll recognize the character I refer to right away!

## The Tooth Collector

It was the sound of him giggling that made me pause.

“Jeff have a friend over?”

I casually asked my wife the question while unloading the dishwasher.

“Not that I know. I was going to ask you the same thing,” she replied, rearranging the plates in the cupboard, trying not to let me see her fix my mistake.

“You know, it’s ok if different sized plates touch each other,” I chided, smiling at her OCD.

“You know, it’s ok if you put them away properly the first time,” she smirked back, goofy grin plastered across her face.

*“Stop that, it hurts!”*

I looked at my wife.

“Did Jeff just ask someone to stop hurting him?”



“I think so. Maybe go peek on him?”

I replied to her question by walking over to the basement door.

“Jeff, hey, maybe you guys stop rough housing so much?”

I half yelled it down, not committed to heading down the stairs. *Maybe I was lazy, maybe my knees ached, I could justify it to my wife, I* thought.

She wasn't buying it.

“Jason, just go down there. Don't be so lazy.”

I huffed and started down the steps, when I heard the basement door open.

“Jeff stay inside, ok bud?”

When I got to the bottom of the steps and rounded the corner to the large play area, I found my son sitting on the over-sized couch, holding his right forearm.

In the middle of the room, one of our laundry baskets was laying. It was flipped upside down. The formerly folded laundry was discarded by the wall.

“Jeff, what the hell? Your mother is going to flip her biscuits when she sees that you unfolded all of these clean clothes.”

Jeff looked up at me, all three feet of him. He was maybe forty pounds, turning 4 in a month. He was on the verge of crying.

“Jeff, hey, it’s ok bud, why the tears?”

I went over and knelt down, and he started sobbing, pointing towards his forearm.

“Did you hurt your arm?”

Jeff nodded, hand not leaving its place. It was grasped firmly on his thin arm.

“Ok. Well let me see. You know I have special parent healing powers, right?”

Jeff nodded again, cheeks lined with water streaks.

Slowing raising his hand off of the area of concern, I let out a long whistle.

“Wow, bud that looks horrible. Whatever will we do?”

My son's arm had a small scratch on it. Whatever had scratched him had not broken the skin.

"But daddy, the serpent says its teeth have poison."

*Huh, now someone has taught him the word serpent. Great.*

"Some do, yes that is correct. But many don't. Many snakes can bite you but nothing will happen. Just an ouchie and then a mark.

Were you outside playing and a snake decided to make you lunch?"

While I should have been angry at Jeff for going outside unsupervised, I believed the snake had done me a favour and taught him a lesson.

"No, daddy. The serpent was playing hide and seek with me. It had the basket on its head."

Jeff then ran over, grabbed the basket and put his head in it.

Wearing it like a hat, he made growling noises.

"Oh, I see. Very scary."

Jeff kept doing it, waving his arms wide, hands shaped like claws.

"Well, how did the door open?"

I walked over, took a quick glance outside, before shutting the door and locking it.

“The serpent went outside when it heard you come downstairs.”

“Well that makes sense,” I replied, walking back to him.

“Have you healed up now? Or is the poison still flowing in your veins?”

Jeff lifted his arm up to show me. The mark was already gone.

“Ok, well there we go. Now let’s head up and brush our teeth. It’s getting close to bed time.”

I let Jeff head up the stairs first. I wasn’t sure why, but I waited until I was all the way upstairs to turn off the lights.

\*

Over the next number of days, my wife and I heard Jeff playing downstairs. I had filled her in on what he had told me. She was adamant she never taught him the word serpent. So we both assumed maybe Sesame Street had worked its magic.

From time to time I would sneak down a few steps. Just enough to take a quick look, make sure Jeff was not up to anything he shouldn't be. My wife wondered why I was being such a helicopter parent. I couldn't explain it to her. Something had just felt wrong with my interaction with Jeff that night.

\*

Three weeks later, we heard Jeff playing with his friend again.

"Jen, did you know Jeff had a friend over?"

I knew the answer before she replied, but for peace of mind, I asked anyways.

"I was just going to ask you."

This time, I wasn't going to announce myself to them.

I went outside, onto our deck, and then using our family selfie-stick, lowered my phone down, so that I could film the basement from outside.

I pulled the stick back up, after a few minutes of recording. I went back inside and took the phone off of the stick.

Pressing play, I wasn't expecting the footage to have anything on it, other than Jeff.

At first the video was out of focus, showing the side of the house, our patio furniture by the back door, the bushes and the ground. Then it turned to face the window looking into the basement play area.

I paused it.

"Jen, get over here. There *is* someone playing downstairs with our son," I whispered, not wanting to be so loud that they heard me downstairs.

"What do you mean?"

"Just get over here, now."

She hurried over and I pressed play again, angling the screen so that she could also see.

The video started again. In the basement play area, Jeff was running back and forth, keeping a good four feet of space between his little body and the hulking mass of whoever was down there with him.

The thing had our laundry basket over its head, obscuring what it looked like, from the shoulders up. From the shoulders down, it resembled a homeless person. It was wearing tattered, dirty rags, which were layered on its body. The shape of Jeff's playmate reminded me of a hulking wrestler or bodyguard. Large shoulders, thick back, muscular arms. With the white, plastic laundry basket over its head, it looked like it had been plucked straight from a comic book and placed in the basement.

I was scared to my core. The dread I felt, washed over me, making my vision go blurry.

"Jason, you need to go downstairs right now!" Jen was shaking.

I put the phone down, and looked at her.

"Call 911," I said as I went quickly to the garage. I grabbed one of my golf clubs, a 7 iron, and headed to the basement.

As I started down the stairs, I let out a guttural yell, holding the club as high over my head as the ceiling would allow.

As I got to the bottom of the steps, I heard the back door slam shut.

Entering the play area, Jeff was standing over in the back corner, looking in towards the wall.

There was no sign of the large person on the video. I rushed out the basement door, and spotted our laundry basket over at the edge of the yard. A larger area of the bushes was pushed away, appearing to show where someone had went through.

Jogging back in, Jeff was still standing in the corner, Jen crouched down beside him.

“Ok Jeff, who was that?”

I tried to ask it without sounding angry or scared, but my voice wavered.

“He says it was the serpent,” my wife replied, half hugging him.



His tiny body was crammed so far into the corner I wasn't sure how he could even breathe.

“Why is he still in the corner?”

My wife gave me a look, a subtle way indicating that I should drop it, but I was fired up. *Who the hell was in our house?*

“Jason, just go upstairs. Give us a minute please.”

I understood.

I went upstairs, returning my golf club to my golf bag.

I was sitting at the kitchen table when a knock at the door caused me to jump. Opening the door, it occurred to me that Jen had called 911. Standing before me was a tall, skinny man in an expensive looking suit. His face was off-putting, and I found I was having trouble looking directly into his almond shaped eyes.

“We received a phone call that there was an intruder in your house?”

While the man spoke, his head darted back and forth, looking past me, surveying the house.

“Yes we did, but I scared them off. Is it just you? Wouldn’t more officers respond to an intruder call?”

I found it very odd that only one man was standing here. He had a white, four door sedan parked out front, half on the sidewalk. It didn’t even appear to be a police car.

“Your wife was on the phone and said you scared them off, so the call was downgraded. I am here to investigate. Gather some clues.”

*Makes sense, I thought, still doesn’t feel right.*

“Where is your wife and son?”

“In the basement,” I pointed at the stairs, “my wife was just calming our son down.”

“Excellent. Wait up here please. I want a minute alone with them, and then I will get your statement.”

The tall man proceeded down the stairs, and when I watched him walk, I felt a shiver go up my spine. He was decidedly creepy.

After thirty minutes, Jen, Jeff and the Detective all came up the stairs, Jeff looking ashamed. It was then that I noticed Jeff had some blood on his chin.

“Dad, your son would like to apologize to you.”

I knelt down, making sure I was at Jeff’s eye level.

“Ok, whenever you are ready Jeff.”

Jeff slowly looked up, bottom lip quivering, eyes covered in a shallow pool of tears.

I felt my heartstrings get plucked and I engulfed him in a hug. I didn’t know what was going on yet, but I knew he was scared.

“Daddy... it was the serpent. He made me open the basement door. Then when you came down, he made me stand in the corner so I wouldn’t be able to watch it disappear.”

“Oh Jeff, I am so sorry. Did the serpent hurt you?”

I leaned back a bit, wanting to see his face. I didn’t think he would lie to me, but if he was that scared you never know.

“No, it didn’t hurt. He just told me that one tooth will do.”

My eyes went wide, looking over at my wife. She was looking out the front window and I could see her eyes were cloudy as well.

“Jeff, can you open your mouth?”

Jeff slowly opened his mouth, which let me see that his left central incisor had been extracted.

Before I could say anything, the man in the suit gently pulled on my shoulder, getting my attention.

“Jason, please, let’s let your wife and son have a moment, get cleaned up. I need to get your statement.”

I stood up and followed the man outside to the deck. My wife went over to the sink, running a cloth under the water. We locked eyes for a minute and I knew what she was telling me.

*I don't trust this Detective.*

I gave her a slight nod, and returned my attention to the man, as he started asking me questions.

The tall man asked me a number of questions, and I went through the narrative of what had happened, up until the knock on the door.

The entire time, I kept noticing something was reflecting in the back yard, shining in my eye. It was sitting near the section of the bushes at the back, where something had forced its way through.

“Anything else Jason?”

“Huh? What? Sorry, I zoned out for a second,” I replied, forgetting for a few moments that the man was still here.

“Nothing. It’s ok. Here is my card. If you think of anything else give me a call.”

I took the card and the man left, making some small talk with my wife. I heard the door close, and then looked down at the card.

It was completely blank except for a phone number. The number had an area code I wasn’t familiar with.

My wife came out to the deck.

“We need to talk to Jeff. That thing took one of his teeth. He said that it was going to return tomorrow for more.”

I pushed by my wife, headed down the stairs, through the play area, and out into the backyard.

I rushed to the section of bush, searching for the item that had been reflecting.

I dropped to my hands and knees, searching with my hands for an object.

“Jason, what are you doing?”

I heard my wife behind me, heard her approaching, but I didn’t stop or reply.

*Jackpot.*

My right hand connected with something hard and sharp. Picking it up, I stood up and held it out to inspect.

As Jen arrived she let out a startled squeal.

I was holding a tooth. It was three inches long and came to a sharp point with a slight curve. One end had traces of blood on it, indicating it had been recently removed.

There was no doubt in my mind that this was a snake’s tooth.

\*

Sleep wouldn't come.

I tossed and turned, the vision of that tall man and the snake's tooth playing over and over in my mind.

I listened to my wife and son sleeping peacefully. There was no chance Jeff was sleeping in his room alone tonight, so we had made sure he came and slept with us.

Every creak, every groan of the house made me listen intently. *If I was ever going to have super powers, now would be ideal*, I pleaded.

My eyes grew heavy, my limbs became light, and I drifted off.

The large shadow moved in the hallway, coming to a stop at our door.

\*

I woke up the next morning to screams.

Bounding out of bed, I found my wife on our bed, chin covered in blood.

She was screaming while Jeff sat shaking beside her on the bed. He had pulled his legs up in tight to his body, arms wrapped around them.

“Jen are you ok?” I asked, as I rushed around the bed to her side.

She tried to speak. At first only blood and spittle came out, a tangy orange-tinged fluid leaking out of the sides of her lips. Her face looked like she had been electrocuted; lips trembling, eyes wide, her nostrils flaring.

“My teef are... my teef are gon,” she finally stammered. She opened her mouth to show me. All of her teeth were gone, her mouth was now just rows of bloody gums.

She began crying, screaming, shaking and while I tried to calm her down, I was glancing over at Jeff. His eyes were blank.

“Jeff are you ok?” I asked as I tried to get Jen to stand up. We needed to take her to emergency right away. Or a dentist. I honestly didn't know.



“The serpent was here. It made me stay quiet. I’m sorry I peed the bed.”

I glanced down and saw that Jeff had peed the bed.

“That’s ok, you were scared. Come, we need to take your mom to get help.”

Jeff begrudgingly made his way off of our bed and followed us down the stairs. I grabbed the car keys and we went into the garage.

We quickly backed out and drove away.

In my rush, I didn’t see the white four door sedan parked across the street.

The tall, skinny man in an expensive looking suit was smiling a wide smile, mouth filled with bloody teeth.

\*

There wasn’t much they could do for my wife. They did emergency dental surgery to clean up her gums and work to prevent any infection. Once she was healed we would begin the process of dentures.

When we got home late that day, Jen fled to our bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

I looked down at Jeff, who had waited patiently with me all day at the hospital.

“You want some food buddy?”

Jeff just nodded. He looked so exhausted, but I was still proud of how well he had handled the long wait at the hospital.

I warmed up some leftovers we had in the fridge and once the microwave dinged, I used some gloves to take it out.

“Here we go,” I said, before realizing I was alone in the kitchen.

I could see the glow of light coming from the basement.

*I didn't even hear him go down there.*

“Jeff?”

I took a few steps towards the basement, when I heard my son's voice.

“Please don't hurt my daddy, you already hurt my mommy,” he pleaded.

I froze. I expected a reply, but when Jeff spoke again, I realized that whatever was down there with him was communicating only to Jeff; it wasn't allowing me to hear it speak.

"I promise, I promise they won't do anything else. Just take my teeth and don't hurt them, please?"

I could hear my son crying now. This got me moving.

I ran down the stairs as fast as I could, taking the steps two at a time.

As I landed at the bottom something solid hit me in the face, sending me sprawling to the floor.

"Daddy!" Jeff cried out.

I shook my head, trying to get my bearings. Looking into the play area, I saw the hulking creature carrying my son over its shoulder.

It was walking towards the open door and Jeff was struggling, but it was no use.

His tiny arms and legs kicked and punched, but the creature was far too big, far too strong for Jeff to have any affect against it.

“Jeff,” I yelled, getting to my feet and running after them.

I left the house, spotting the two of them half way across the back yard. Jeff was still screaming and pleading for me.

As they got to the bushes at the edge of the yard, the creature finally turned and looked at me.

Behind them, the bushes parted and the creature held up my son. In one smooth movement, like a magician pulling a tablecloth off, it used one clawed finger and removed all of my son’s teeth. The creature then turned and tossed Jeff through the opening.

“JEFF!” I screamed, rushing towards the creature. As I got close, I went into a crouch, ready to tackle it. When I made contact, I immediately regretted the decision. It felt like I had impacted a cement statue.

I bounced off, feeling my left shoulder dislocate, arm hanging limply.

As I lay on the ground, trying to work through the searing pain coursing through my body, I watched in disgusted astonishment as the

creature threaded my son's teeth through a thin piece of string or wire. The creature pulled the thread from somewhere in its rags, then took the time to wet the end. It then used its strength to force it through the cracked molars. It then wrapped the wire around its neck, making a macabre necklace out of the teeth.

From behind me a scream erupted, and looking up at the deck I saw my wife Jen.

The scene below her was too much and she collapsed to her knees.

"I'm sorry Jason," a voice I instantly recognized, spoke from behind me, "but we needed the boy. Don't worry though. We didn't forget about you."

The tall, skinny man in the expensive looking suit walked around from behind to face me. He motioned with his hand, and the massive creature with the reptilian face moved forward.

It picked me up easily with one hand and I was mesmerized by its tongue darting in and out of its mouth. With the hand holding me, it

began to squeeze harder, forcing me to take a deep breath, opening my mouth wide. In one quick movement with its other hand, it ripped all of my teeth out, the loud pops of each molar leaving my mandible sounding like gunshots through my skull. Once done it dropped me.

“Good work serpent. Now come, the boy is still crying.”

The two then walked through the bushes, my wife still screaming on the back deck.

I made my way to my feet, saliva and blood now pouring out of my mouth. My arm still dangling, lifeless.

I grunted and groaned as I forced my body through the bushes, just in time to watch the four door sedan slowly pull away from the sidewalk. Jeff was in the back, face and hands pressed hard up against the window, screaming for me.

The tall man was driving, and seeing me, gave a friendly wave, bloody toothed grin covering his face. There was no sign of the creature.

As the car drove away, Jeff's screaming diminished, eventually fading to the point where I could no longer hear it.

My mouth was now on fire, my body responding to the extraction of all of my teeth.

I could hear my wife screaming still.

I felt something hard in my pocket. Reaching in, my hand closed around the snake's tooth I had found.

The end was sharper than I was expecting and I felt it prick my finger, causing a warmth to rapidly spread up my arm.

I knew I was in trouble immediately. Jen's screaming grew fuzzy and distant and my vision began to spin.

As I dropped to my knees, feeling my lungs growing warm and my heart beating furiously in my chest, I remembered something Jeff had said that first night.

*"But daddy, the serpent says its teeth have poison."*

As blood began to pour from my eye sockets and ears, I knew that the serpent hadn't lied to Jeff.

I just wish I had known the meaning then.

END



## Story #4 – The Navajo Nightmare

So here we are! The last tale of darkness included in this little mini-release.

So The Navajo Nightmare was originally submitted to Flame Tree Press for possible anthology inclusion, but unfortunately wasn't picked up. So I've included it as the third story joining The Girl Who Hid in the Trees and it's the fourth one here.

This tale also filled a spot for me. A supernatural western story. I've previously released two western tinged stories; Time Out Noose and Too the Moon – Sadness. Neither had any supernatural elements. So here we are, me scratching that itch.

This one also really hit home for my love of horror themed westerns. So this story will be the intro story leading into (hopefully) the 2020 release of a full length novel, co-written with another fantastic writer, using the same title; The Navajo Nightmare. I'll keep you all updated as progress goes along!

So enjoy this fun ride!

## The Navajo Nightmare

The belt hung preposterously low, as though it was being pulled straight to hell by the hands of his dead.

He couldn't fully close his hands, the nails having been recently removed. Dried blood flaked off as he flexed his fingers, his mouth curled in a grimace as the pain scorched through his nerves.

He knew shortly he would need to strike, but for now he was a shadow, hiding in plain sight.

The revolver stayed coiled in the holster, like a rattlesnake waiting to strike.

“You going to stand and stare all day, or we going to get to some killing?”

The voice yelling from the side of the crowded street had the effect he was looking for; his challenger glanced, for less than half a second, towards the yeller. It was all he needed.

The air was cut through with a crack, as the pistol blasted, and the challenger dropped dead in the street, the middle of his forehead turned into a bay window.

“Arrest that... that thing!”

The sheriff bellowed loudly as a group worked to pull the dead lawman from the dirty road, but it was too late. The Navajo Nightmare was gone, disappearing before anyone could grab him.

\*

The tale of the Navajo Nightmare began with low-whispers in the back of bars. Bandits spoke in hushed tones, telling the story of an outlaw, an Indian with his face painted white with red lines through his eyes, who would suddenly appear. The horse he rode was 17 hands high, and could run faster than the trains across an open plain.

As the legend grew so did the mythology; he had been captured by Soldiers and was forced to convert, only to seek vengeance. Others said that his family had been captured and scalped, so now he sought

each person involved one by one. One person surmised that he painted another red line on his face after each kill. The only thing that anyone could confirm to be true was that the Navajo Nightmare was the fastest draw hands down. There was no one even close.

Which is why Robert was contacted. You see, Robert was the fastest gun in the west. Or so the billing on his marquee said. He would travel around, following the circus circuit and make a few bucks in each town. He would do the ole shoot an apple off someone's head, while they were both blindfolded, and he would shoot five random items thrown into the air before any of them touched the ground.

You see, the Navajo Nightmare's latest victim was none-other-than Deputy Billy Johnson. And just who was Deputy Johnson you ask? Well he was the son of the Vice President. So Robert was contacted and then contracted to hunt down the Navajo Nightmare and kill him once and for all.

So on a breezy October morning, Robert and four other lawmen met up to help track their suspect, set off, heading towards the unforgiving foothills several miles out of town.

\*

That first day, the five men had high hopes. None of them believed the stories that had been passed around about a ghost Indian, a native walker back from the dead. How could they? For if you were dead, would you not shoot imaginary bullets? No, they believed this man to be just that, a man. A man with face-paint, a big horse and an accurate shot. Robert didn't even think his shot was very fast. He made the assumption that because people had built the shooter up so much that they simply froze and were surprised with the display before them.

Nope, Robert told the other men, he would shoot the Navajo Nightmare before the man even knew they were there.

The four lawmen appreciated the realism of the showman, but in truth, they were all a little nervous. They were not so sure that Robert himself wouldn't freeze, when faced with the very real threat of death. They had decided not to tell Robert that in order to find the Navajo Nightmare, they would be heading deep into hostile territory, and worried he might tuck tail and run.

That first night, the men made camp near the base of the foothills. The lawmen had all brought rucksacks to fashion makeshift hammocks. They knew the area was teeming with rattlesnakes and didn't want to risk being attacked while sleeping.

This was something Robert was unaware of, so he spent the night restless and uncomfortable trying to sleep on his horse.

\*

The second morning of their 'adventure' as Robert had called it, was met with the first sign of trouble. For when the group woke up, they discovered that there was now only three lawmen remaining. The

fourth had simply disappeared in the night, leaving his horse and belongings.

“This doesn’t make sense, why would he just walk off?”

“Maybe he woke up to take a piss and simply got turned around?”

Robert’s presumption was something he had heard could happen, but the other men had none of it.

“He has 25 years of guiding service to his record. He would not simply get turned around. He was taken. Something was here, the air tastes foul.”

The group packed up quickly, taking the missing man’s horse and belongings with them. They couldn’t find any trace of the man, or any tracks suggesting someone else had been there.

“I don’t like this one bit,” said the largest of the lawmen. Robert detested that they wouldn’t tell him their names, but tried to not let it bother him.

The men rode in silence for the next several hours before stopping for a drink and a late breakfast. Finally Robert couldn't stand the anonymity anymore.

"So tell me," Robert asked, "why won't you tell me your names?"

The three remaining lawmen all smirked at the question, before the largest one, and the one Robert now assumed to be the leader replied.

"So tell us, showman, what makes you believe you can ask that question?"

This caused the three of them to burst out laughing, slapping their knees and snorting.

"I don't find this funny at all. The Vice President has personally asked me to track down and kill the man responsible for his son's death. And you three laugh at me?"



“Calm down showman. We are just trying to lighten the mood. For the day will grow darker before the night comes, we can assure you of that. Now to answer your question. I was born with a name, but when I went into service training they strip you of it. We are all trained to do one job and that is protect the law and our country. We are all lawmen and as such do not need an identifying name. If you must, you may call me John. That there is William, and the fellow beside you is Butch.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.”

“Now let’s move out,” said John, “the terrain grows rough and the territory will grow dangerous. Keep your eyes sharp and your wits about you.”

The four saddled up and headed off, unaware of the watching eyes from above.

\*

The rain came unexpectedly, but with no worry of a flash flood. The group decided to leave the missing lawman's horse behind, as the ground turned muddy. They didn't want to risk it slipping or falling. A broken leg out here was a death sentence for a horse.

Robert found himself lost in the beauty of their surroundings. For the last decade he had been limited to his train car and the stage in each city. His schedule was such that he had very limited down time and any chance of being a tourist disappeared as soon as the show was over. Now though, he found himself mouth agape, staring at the hills jutting up all around them. He was so entranced that he almost didn't see that the three ahead of him had come to an abrupt halt.

"Why did we stop?" he asked.

"Quiet. Voice down." John snapped back and then motioned for the lawman behind him to move. The lawman, known to Robert now as Butch, jumped off his horse and made a slow approach ahead of

John. Robert couldn't see what was in front of them, but he could see William was frantically looking around the hills.

Robert leaned over to get a better view and was repulsed with what he saw.

The missing lawman was propped up in the middle of the path ahead. He was still in uniform, but he was missing his face. The grinning skull stared back at the crew, arms pulled out beside him, like a poorly made human cross.

"He did this," Butch said, as he arrived at the dead man. "What should we do with his body?"

"Leave it. The buzzards will pick it bare and we don't have time to stop and bury him. Let us say a prayer for his soul and move on."

Butch and William both said Amen and Butch returned to his horse. Mounting it quickly they moved on. Robert couldn't take his eyes off of the skull face as they rode by, the flesh completely removed, the white of the bone like porcelain.

\*

That night they decided to sleep in shifts, with someone staying awake, keeping guard. It was agreed that Robert would simply sleep, as they wanted him rested and alert, should his quick draw be needed the following day. To nobody's surprise, Robert didn't fight against the motion and went to sleep immediately.

"Great, we are in the presence of a coward," William spoke, as the three men filled their lips with chew and passed around a flask.

"Hush," John replied fiercely, "any man who saw what was done to our lawman back there and didn't turn and flee has some courage in him. I just hope he doesn't lose it when we need it most."

\*

Robert woke the next day, glad to find all men were accounted for.

"Saddle up. We will eat at lunch. Until then we ride. I suspect our mercenary is stationed near the waterfalls at the old gulch. I have

heard reports that some wagons have been robbed near there and the suspect had a painted face.”

The three lawmen and the showman rode silently, focused on ending this, bringing some justice to the murdered son. They knew the Vice President would be forever grateful.

\*

As the sun arrived at the height of its path, the gang of men neared the gulch. Robert had never seen a waterfall before and was excited to see one in person.

A whistling noise pierced the air and William was thrown clear of his horse. The force of the arrow threw him ten feet off of his stead and the projectile went clean through his body.

“Attack! Down, down!” John yelled and Robert and Butch pitched off of their horses. In their haste Robert realized he only had his pistol, his rifle still holstered on the horse.

From above the men rocks began to rain down causing them to scramble, trying to find a safe place to hide. An alcove in the hill offered them refuge from the barrage.

“That can’t be one man,” Robert said, sounding like he was on the verge of crying.

“I don’t believe so, no. But whoever it is doesn’t want us to get to our man. We have been followed for some time now.”

As quickly as the rocks had started they stopped. The men slowly made their way back to their horses, who luckily had stayed.

“Alright, that’s the second sign trying to prevent us from continuing on. I suspect the third attempt will be the most vicious of them all. Butch, kick William’s body into the river. Maybe in death he will rot and ruin their drinking source.”

John swatted his horse’s rear end with the leather strap and started out ahead, while Butch went over to William.

“Until we meet again,” he said, pushing the body into the water. Getting back onto his horse, he gave a quick salute then motioned for Robert to get moving.

Soon they would come face to face with a living nightmare, but once again, none of the men looked above to see the watching eyes.

\*

On the last day of their journey, the men found themselves at a literal crossroads.

“Which way should we go?” Robert pondered, looking at the path to the left and then the path to the right. Neither path looked like it had been recently travelled.

“We will head to the left. I have heard reports of an old miners shack up this way. To me that makes the most sense for a hide-out. There isn’t a lot of traffic coming through this way, most travelers stay to the flats and it’s only a half days ride out, to get more water or if you were going to rob a caravan.”

John spoke with such authority that Robert saw no reason whatsoever to question the man.

The three got their horses moving and followed the left hand path. As they went the path began to gradually grow steeper, working its way up the side of the hill.

“The miners shack is close. Guns out fella’s, we need to end this quick.”

Robert pulled his rifle from the holster. His pistol was always close to his hand and would be pulled from its resting place with the speed of a thousand men. He was confident in his abilities. Overconfident some would say.

As the group approached, the shack was spotted. John motioned for them to stop, and they all dismounted. John waved for them to follow and the two kept close to the man as they ducked down and hustled over behind a row of rocks.



“Someone is in there. See the smoke coming from the chimney and a pair of boots at the door? Butch, you flank the shack around the right side. Robert, you stay put here, while I take the left hand side. When I am in position, I will yell, and when that door opens, Robert, you end this.”

Butch and Robert nodded, understanding the orders.

John went to the left, Robert stayed crouched behind nature’s fence, while Butch took off to the right. Robert found he was breathing heavy now, adrenaline firing through his body. He laid the rifle down on the ground, knowing this wasn’t the gun he was going to use.

**“YOU IN THERE! THIS IS THE LAW! COME OUT NOW!”**

Robert hadn’t realized it was going to happen so soon. He stood, turned, and the moment a figure emerged in the darkened opening of the shack’s door, he put two bullets between the man’s eyes. The figure dropped dead on the front stoop.

“Yahoo!” Butch yelled out, running from his hiding spot. A loud bang echoed through the close confines of the hills and Robert watched as Butch’s head exploded behind him. He looked around, trying to get eyes on where the shot came from but it didn’t make sense. The shooter would have been right in front of Butch?

“John, are you ok?”

Robert yelled out to the remaining lawman, but got no response.

Ducking low to the ground he shuffled over towards where John would have been, but found nothing when he got to the spot he assumed the man to be at.

“Where are you John?”

A crack echoed loudly and searing pain ripped through Robert’s right leg, dropping him to the dirt. Looking down he realized he had been shot, the muscle blown open and the bone fragmented below.

Screaming he pain, he frantically waved his hand around trying to find the shooter, when he realized that he had dropped his pistol when he fell.

He quickly found it near his side and as he reached for it a large, bare, scabbed foot slammed his outstretched hand to the ground. Looking up he saw John leering down at him.

“John... what...?” He stammered, trying to piece together the man before him.

“Robert. The word is a cruel, bitter place. I actually was growing to like you. Even as a showman. Any last words?”

“You? You are the Navajo Nightmare?”

The man chuckled, seemingly pleased with the nickname. He then proceeded to reach up and peel away the face of the lawman named John, exposing a white painted face with red paint down his eyes. Casting off the clothes, the man was left exposed, causing Robert to gasp.

The Navajo Nightmare was missing large chunks of skin, exposing rotting organs and yellowed, decaying bone beneath. A leather skirt worn loosely covered the man's groin but that was all he was wearing. Long thick black hair adorned his head, but Robert could see a small line of blood near the scalp.

"Is your hair not even real?"

The living hell before the showman grabbed his hair and peeled it back. The scalp struggled to let go, thick strands of pus and flesh hanging on for dear life. It finally let go with a slurping sound, exposing a yellowed skull and leaving behind chunks of skin.

"Robert. I have been dead for hundreds of years. Ever since my family was slaughtered. A relative of yours was there. He held the axe. He took my scalp and took my life. Now, I take yours."

"I challenge you to a duel. Let the faster man live."

"Showman, I would normally accept your challenge. But not today."

Then the Navajo Nightmare pounced, his Tsenil maul high, crushing Robert's skull.

Robert died with his hand on his gun, too slow to stay alive.

Reaching down, the man stuck two fingers into Robert's pool of blood, then brought his hand to his face. Pulling his bloody finger down, the murderer streaked another red line through the white paint.

The Navajo Nightmare then turned and walked by the shack, past the dead miner with two bullet wounds between his eyes and the dead lawman known as Butch. He then stopped, put two fingers in the sides of his mouth and whistled loudly.

A massive beast of a horse appeared from the hills, 17 hands high, missing large chunks of its flesh. The man hoisted himself onto the stallion and kicked the animal's sides hard. The horse galloped forward, before the two figures disappeared into the shadows, on the hunt for more retribution.

END

## Afterword

So there you go! All done. Thank you for checking out this great little tale. Thank you to Mason McDonald for throwing together the fantastic cover image!

As I said, feel free to review this over on Goodreads;

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/43564474-four-dark-tales>

And if this intrigues you, please check out The Girl Who Hid in the Trees, or any of my other work!

USA:

<https://www.amazon.com/Girl-Who-Hid-Trees-ebook/dp/B07MJ851BH>

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<https://www.amazon.ca/Girl-Who-Hid-Trees-ebook/dp/B07MJ851BH>

If you want to stay in touch, find me at any of these places!

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Cheers!

Steve

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Abraham, Look to the Sky, The Tooth Collector and The Navajo Nightmare all appear in The Girl Who Hid in the Trees, release date February 28, 2019.