

SUMMONER of SLEEP



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Dedication

For Mike Young, fellow horror lover, champion of my writing
since day one, and an amazing friend.

This one's for you.

“Only fate is to blame.”

—Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*

Chapter 1

Ryder

A figure appeared from the mist and ripped a thread from the center of his forehead. He screeched in agony, but then the end of the thread morphed into a black oozing mass. The figure squished the thick sludge in his face and laughed. Blinded, he wiped the burning slime from his face and ran. Eyes surrounded him. Thousands of eyes. Eyes like white, shining gems looking at him from above, below, and upside down. Eyes in black heads. Eyes that followed him as he flew through the emptiness. Out of breath, he peered over his shoulder at the eyes that had now transformed into clocks. Their chimes and rings echoed through the darkness. His pulse throbbed in his ears as he searched for a place to hide in the barren landscape. In an instant, the sky blackened with metal parts. Cold steel gears and sharp spokes pelted and serrated his flesh into ribbons. He choked on wallowing tears and slipped on his own blood. The clocks multiplied and descended upon him.

—

Ryder Ashling's body burned like a bonfire, but he refused to let go of the quilt wrapped around him.

"Explain the meaning of this right now." Julie's gaze slashed back and forth as she scanned the pile of clocks tangled in the sweat-soaked bed sheets.

"I already told you. The clocks came back from my dreams with me."

"Tell me the truth. You and I both know that there's no way in hell clocks just appear out of thin air like that and end up in our bed in the middle of the night."

"You think I just put them there?"

"Yes."

"You're crazy," Ryder said.

"Oh, I'm the crazy one? Who's afraid of something as stupid as a clock?"

"I told you about my nightmares before we got married. Why are you so surprised?"

"You told me you dreamed about clocks, not that they came back with you."

"I know...I know," Ryder said through his clenched jaw. "This has never happened to me before though. Can't you just cut me some slack?"

"No. And you better do something about it." Her face and throat flushed as she darted out of the bed.

"What do you want me to do?" He wiped the sweat from his brow with the quilt. "You know I've tried everything to stop the nightmares. Hypnosis, drugs, alcohol, sleep deprivation, meditation. All those disgusting sleeping concoctions make me queasy. You know that nothing works."

She crossed her arms with a scoff. "I've put up with your blood-curdling screams waking me up at all hours of the night. The welts, bruises, and scratches on your skin each morning. The sleepwalking. Getting phone calls at two in the morning

from neighbors asking me to pick you up from their lawn. And now this. I can't deal with this shit anymore, Ryder." Julie strode across the bedroom.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to live in the guestroom. When you stop playing these asinine jokes on me, then I'll come back to bed."

"Wait. I already told you. I'm not playing a joke on you. This is real. Please believe me. You're my wife for Christ's sake."

Her wicked glance shot him dead, then she slammed the door so hard their wedding picture sprung from the wall and broke.

For the next hour, Ryder's cries echoed through the cold vaulted hallways of the Ashling house. He had cried two other times in his life. Once when his beloved beagle Bologna died, and once when his stepdad smacked him around for writing poetry. Tears poured from his eyes as he turned and stared at the mound of ticking clocks in his bed. He was too afraid to touch them, to believe they were real.

A sharp pain ached in his gut and Ryder rushed into the bathroom and gagged into the sink, but nothing came up.

His hands struggled to grasp the medicine cabinet handle, but he rose from the depths of despair to ease it open.

What concoction will numb my pain tonight?

His gaze zipped to a little brown vial with a tag wound around the neck that read CURE.

Was this new or old? Who cares?

Ryder palmed the vial, closed the medicine cabinet, and caught a reflection of his haunted face. The Botox hadn't done a damn thing and neither had his weight gain powder.

He sighed and examined the contents of the vial in the light, then uncorked it, and took a generous whiff.

Like an ancient diaphanous entity summoned from the past, the pungent scent burned the delicate membranes inside his nostrils. Luminous colors, exotic tastes, and mesmerizing sounds enveloped him—a merry-go-round for the senses. It was

pure glory in a bottle for a fleeting second, until a bone-freezing shock swept through his shaken body.

His limbs started to stiffen as if rubber coursed through his veins.

“J-Julie? Help. Julie.”

His cries fell like stones into the silence of the house.

His legs were like two wooden boards that tipped him into the wall. Ryder grasped for anything he could to keep himself standing—the bathroom curtains, the shelf, the molding, but then it spread to his arms. They were stuck directly in front of him and he couldn’t move any of his joints or fingers. He plummeted to the floor as everything disappeared into darkness.

—

Ryder sat up and bit back a scream in the morning light. A puddle of blood surrounded him on the tile. He touched a sore spot on the back of his head and winced.

He stood and steadied himself against the cold bathroom countertop. There were no signs of welts or scratches from the clocks on his skin and he could move his joints again.

“Julie?” He stumbled about in such a state that if his wife saw him, she would accuse him of being drunk—this time, not rightfully. “Julie? H-help me.”

Outside the birds chirped with cheerful melodies, taunting him.

He staggered into the bedroom, but an echo followed. He skimmed the barren room, the dusty shelves, and empty closets.

“No. You couldn’t have.” Ryder snatched a letter addressed to him on the bed. *I’m leaving. I’m sorry*, it read in black Sharpie. He flipped it over.

“That’s all you have to say to me? You didn’t even have the decency to sign it?”

Bitch.

He clenched his fists so tight his knuckles went white, and he threw the crumpled paper at the bed. Then he jerked back,

fell against the wall, and slid to the floor like a loogie into the gutter. Tears welled and dropped down his cheeks. Now he cried for the fourth time.

“I can’t believe you left me for good.” He wallowed. Her blissful, toothy smile shot through his memory. He loved that smile. “I never thought you’d get the nerve. I gave you everything. You never had to work a day in your life. All you did was sip margaritas by the pool and go to yoga classes, you bitch.”

Earlier in the week, she took him to see a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist had diagnosed him with *chronomentrophobia*—fear of clocks. It was a rare phobia, incurable, and characterized as a fear of time passing too quickly. The disappointed look on Julie’s face weighed heavy in his mind.

More tears splashed onto the floor. His head spun and he lurched back to the bathroom, knelt over the toilet, and vomited, wiping away the sweat on his face in between heaves.

He stood with a swimmy head, hunched over the sink, and cupped water in his hands beneath the running faucet. He wiped the residual water from his purple, cracked lips and turned off the tap, as he stared at his inflamed eyes in the mirror, which looked light gray rather than their usual tar-black. The soft, tender spot underneath his ribcage ached when he inhaled.

He slammed his fist on the porcelain. “Why don’t I have normal dreams like everyone else?” His skin crawled at the engrained image of disembodied eyes following him that transformed into clocks. “You’re such a fucking disgrace. Can’t even keep your wife.”

Ryder balled his fists. He squeezed them tighter. The thin skin burst from the pressure of his nails. Blood pooled in his palms and dripped on the tile. “Stupid dreams.” He punched the mirror. Glass shards burst into a glittery explosion.

Woozy, Ryder groped the window frame, looking half-dazed out the upstairs window. Outside his neighbor skulked about. Ryder had caught old, pudgy Claude Wick spying on him through his bathroom window on more than one occasion.

He was a garrulous neighbor, and their conversations started amicably, but they always turned toward Claude's dead wife—a person whom Ryder never met. Claude liked flannel shirts and a smelly pipe after dinner, and detested noise, mess, and weeds. They were natural enemies.

He glanced at the small mirror installed in a discreet location outside the window which aligned with the enormous clock in the middle of downtown.

Crap. Seven-thirty. Time for work.

For a second, Ryder was tempted to call in sick, but he hadn't missed a single day of work since he started at the firm eight years ago, and he would be damned to let anything affect the promotion he labored so exhaustingly for. He refused for all those sixteen-hour days to go to waste; for all the nights he'd slept at the office and caught hell from Julie to be for nothing; for his rivals who threw him under the bus to reap his reward. He closed the bathroom curtains, washed, and went to the walk-in closet, and changed into a suit, not bothering to spend the extra time matching his tie to his sock color.

Ryder headed down the hall, trying not to notice more missing items, and stopped at the top of the staircase. As his pale hand slid over the cool banister, the blood from his palm mingled with the wood polish and gave off a most peculiar metallic pine scent. Vomit rose in his throat and he swallowed it.

“No.”

The stairs were huge beneath his feet and the distance to the kitchen took forever. A small brown vial without a tag sat near the cookie jar on the counter. The dazzling confetti of green and gold liquids swirled with a hypnotic invitation.

“What the—?” Ryder hurried toward the vial and picked it up. “Julie? Are you messing with me?” he called and spun around, but silence met his ears. He returned his attention to the vial. “I'm not making the same mistake,” he said—about to set it down, but then his eager fingers popped the cork independently

from his brain.

Euphoria followed, but only for a minute. The substance once again encased him before tendrils of panic and pain trembled through his helpless, rubberized body. The world stopped. Every cell in his body deflated.

“Noooooo,” he screamed through his constricted throat. He fell to the floor.

—

Ryder’s eyes flew open. The sun streamed upon him and the blue jays chattered from the garden.

He pulled himself up, stood with the aid of the kitchen countertop, and glanced out the window. His gaze darted to one of his mirrors positioned outside the kitchen window. He wouldn’t have believed it was six o’ clock in the morning had the automatic sprinklers not kicked on at their programmed time right then.

Ryder spun around. An overturned vial lay on the kitchen floor and his chest tightened.

It happened again?

All signs indicated an entire day had passed.

Three new vials now waited on the counter.

Too afraid to touch them, he studied them at a distance for comparison. They were the same size, shape, and color, had no discernible markings, and there were no indications of their origin—just the brilliance of their mesmerizing colors that swirled inside them, illuminating the little that remained of his sanity.

Ryder picked up the vials with his sleeve, threw them in an empty grocery bag, then headed to the car.

—

He entered the damp apothecary shop adjacent to the town’s pioneer cemetery out of breath. He slammed the door behind

him and then cringed. Vern Wick glanced up from behind the counter amidst the thick, incensed air.

There was little organization in the shop: hundreds of dusty bottles lined the shelves, velvet satchels of herbs kept company with wide-potted plants, and colorful soaps made into the shapes of pie slices; he could get lost for hours just examining all of it, but Ryder wasn't interested today. He'd been coming to the local apothecary each week for the past two years and if anyone could help him identify the substance in his CURE bottles, it was Vern.

"Ah, Ryder. Welcome," said the apothecarist. He rose from the chair. Although Vern never traveled, his tanned, hydrated skin made it look as if he had just returned from a vacation. Vern glanced at his watch. "I'm surprised to see you here since you're normally at work during this time. Did I forget about an appointment?"

"No." Ryder fixated on the watch. "Could you put that away please?"

"Oh, right. I always forget about my watch, but I didn't know you were coming in today." Vern fiddled with the strap and stashed it under the counter.

"Well, how did the latest blend go?"

"Doesn't matter." Ryder slowly dumped the vials upon the counter, his palms slick with sweat. "Are these your bottles?"

Vern squinted. "No."

"I thought Julie might've purchased them from you."

Vern shrugged.

"Then I need to know what's in here."

Vern's bony fingers reached across the counter.

"Careful." Ryder stopped his hand. "Just holding it made me open them and when I did the contents made me lose consciousness—twice."

"I will. But I need to examine them closer."

"Use a rag or something to hold them, okay?"

Vern's wiry eyebrow arched, but he retrieved a handkerchief

from under the counter and picked up one of the sealed vials. He held it up to the light. Just the sight of the whirling glittery world inside it made Ryder giddy, and he balled his fists before he shoved his hands deep into his pockets.

“Did you have those dreams of yours?”

“No. It’s bizarre. But now there’s a new complication. When I woke the other day there were clocks in the bed with me. I don’t know how or why.”

“Hmm.”

“I don’t know where the vials came from. They just appeared.”

“They appeared in your house?”

“Yes. One yesterday and then more after Julie le—”

The smile vanished from Vern’s face. “You don’t look well. Do you need to sit? I’d hate for my best customer to become ill in my shop.”

Unable to make eye contact or swallow the lump in his throat, Ryder said, “Please just find out what’s inside.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“How long do you think it’ll take?”

“I’ll need to send it to the lab, so about a week or two. I don’t quite see the rush, though. What matters is that it made you sleep well. That’s been our goal this whole time, right?”

“Yeah, it’s just—” Ryder tapped his fingers on the counter. “Please call me the minute you find out, okay? It’s urgent.”

“I will.”

“You believe me, don’t you?” Ryder asked.

Vern cocked his head.

“You believe me that I have the nightmares about the clocks attaching themselves to me and ending up in my bed, don’t you?”

“It doesn’t matter what I believe. What matters is you getting well,” Vern said with a wink, then gathered the vials.

“Okay then. Well, don’t forget to call me the minute you find out. I don’t care if it’s in the middle of the night. I’ll answer.”

The old man nodded. "I will."

Ryder turned with a grin and jingled the car keys in his pocket. He stared out at the city glinting in the distance.

"Yes. I understand now," Vern said. "It's crystal clear."

Ryder looked over his shoulder. "What'd you say?"

Blood was everywhere: blood gushing from Vern's ears and mouth, blood on the counter, blood drenching his sweater, blood coating the floor.

Ryder screamed, rushed to Vern, and grabbed his arm.

"No. It hurts too much," Vern shrieked. "Don't touch me."

"What's wrong? I can't help you if I don't know what happened."

Vern groaned and jetted out the door like he was on fire. He flew through the busy intersection and ran straight into the woods across the street, disappearing into the trees.

Ryder stood breathless at the threshold, his suit and hands crimson. He caught a questioning glance from a man at the bus stop.

"Hey, what did you do? Did you hurt that man?"

"Shit." Ryder lowered his head, strode to his car, and got in.

The man yelled and ran toward his car. "Stop right there." He waved his arms. "I'm calling the police."

Ryder started the ignition. The man jumped and shouted in his rearview mirror, which drew even more attention, so he slammed on the gas.

The roads seemed longer and narrower on the drive home.

What did Vern mean when he said that he understood? That everything was crystal clear? Had he been talking to him or someone else? Had there always been a tree at that intersection? Was that a new deli or an old one?

Shapes and colors passed in a blur, and somehow, he made it home.

He turned off the car, exhaled, and sat in the driveway with closed eyes.

What a rotten day.

“I saw you,” a voice said.

Ryder jolted and got out of the car. “Hello?” He glanced around. Someone’s eyes were on him. Someone watched him and saw the blood splatter on his hands and clothes.

Shit. They would blame him.

He looked at one of the positioned mirrors, noting that several hours had passed, but the drive to the apothecary was only a few minutes and he hadn’t been at the shop for that long.

With shaky hands, Ryder found his house key and ran to the front door, where a bright orange paper the color of construction cones was taped over the peephole. His eyes narrowed.

I’m being evicted? But I’m rich. I always pay the mortgage on time.

Drops of perspiration slid into his eyes and burned them. Ryder tore the notice down and threw it in the bushes. The door screeched open and he stumbled inside and collapsed on the hardwood floor, his legs jelly.

A new vial sat atop a sofa cushion. His gaze darted to the coffee table. Another. Then to the stairs. Another.

—

For days, Ryder sat in his favorite armchair and stared out the window, sometimes going the whole day without food. Showers stopped. Shaving stopped. So did teeth brushing. It didn’t matter.

He called Julie too many times to count, but she never answered. His wedding ring became loose and fell into the heating grate. All the while, vials appeared out of nowhere, beckoning him to partake in the unknown contents within, but he refused to open any more.

They popped up inside the fridge, in cabinets, on chairs, in his bed, on top of the toilet, and sometimes jammed in the toes of his shoes. After he’d gather all the vials in a garbage bag using a broom and dustpan, he’d turn around and more would be there...waiting, multiplying. He double and triple-checked

all the locks and windows in his house, but always found them secure.

A week later Ryder gave up trying to gather and discard the vials. The repossession men broke down the door and took everything but his car since the title was in his former client's name. They also left the filthy chair he refused to move from. He listened to the men joke about what a poor slob he was and make cracks about him. Didn't they know he was someone important? They even repossessed his phone, so there was no way to contact his wife. Could he still call her that? It was a good thing that they took his phone though. He couldn't stand listening to the voicemail from work again explaining how they had let him go and that Ernest got his promotion. The only good news was that he had saved some money in a secret bank account.

The police would remove him from the premises soon. He wouldn't go without a fight and prayed they'd arrest him. Maybe then the vials couldn't follow and he could rest in the solitary pleasure of a dark, cold prison cell. What a blissful fantasy.

Chapter 2

Claude

Claude gritted his teeth and covered his ears. He couldn't believe it had been a year since he had moved into the exuberant Queen Anne next to the Ashlings and the screams still hadn't stopped. Not once.

Ryder seemed like such a normal man who was charitable and accomplished, and Julie always smiled and waved. They were a stereotypical Barbie- and Ken-type couple who wanted a family and a golden retriever, but that didn't explain the horrors that went on in the Ashling home each night. How was he supposed to enjoy his retirement with constant screaming?

He didn't mean to spy on Ryder from the upstairs window. It just so happened that his bedroom window overlooked Ryder's master bathroom, and within a few weeks, Claude could set his watch to the times of his neighbor's screaming episodes. The bathroom light flicked on around 1:30 a.m. every night after a blood-curdling shriek. There was a sleepwalking incident two

times a week. And three times a week there was an additional dream around 3:45 a.m. consisting of panicked yells and loud thumps that sounded like toppling furniture. Claude wondered how much the couple had spent on new furniture each month.

At first, Claude thought they were night terrors until he overheard Julie on the phone. Her voice wafted through the open parlor window as he tended to his roses at the edge of his lawn.

“I can’t take it anymore,” she sobbed. “Ryder’s dreams of phantom clocks. Claims they attack when he’s asleep...now, the clocks are appearing in the bed...it’s all insane. It just can’t be possible. The psychiatrist said his disorder could be dangerous. That he’s capable of violence.”

After overhearing the absurd conversation, Claude noticed that Ryder didn’t wear a watch and there were tiny mirrors positioned outside all the windows too. If Julie’s claims were true, Claude was living next to a psychopath.

Curiosity consumed him, and he looked forward to studying Ryder each night readying for bed as he gulped various concoctions and pills. And as time progressed, Ryder consumed a meager diet of nothing more than black coffee and oranges. All of it intrigued Claude but enjoying the quiet of the day when Ryder was at work was what Claude looked forward to most in his retirement.

Then, two months ago, Ryder started coming home from work for lunch and to nap on the living room sofa. The screams sounded at 12:45 p.m. on those days, with an added dream sometimes at 1:15 p.m.

“Ahhh. Oh, God. Ahhh,” Ryder screamed like a broken record.

Claude’s ears cringed at the screeching. He knew two things from that moment forward: he had spent his life savings on a wonderful home where he could not relax, and the only way to achieve peace and quiet was to move away from the Ashlings and to his family’s old cottage in the woods. There and only there could he live out his tranquil days completing puzzles and

smoking a pipe by the fire, but he needed to sell his house first.

Circumstances were not so easy though. As if premeditated, whenever a potential buyer dropped by announced or not, Ryder's screams sent them running.

Ryder's dreams now affected Claude so much that he no longer slept. Although he still maintained a regular diet, coffee was the one thing that eased his nausea, and the pounds fell from his plump frame so fast that his glasses slid down his nose every time he exhaled.

All these occurrences made him conclude that Ryder's condition might be contagious, and he would be damned if those wretched dreams would affect him as well.

The interminable screams became such a nuisance that he took one full week to devise the perfect stratagem to alleviate both of their suffering.

Somehow, some way, he'd stop Ryder's dreams and he'd fight his insomnia. That was when he stumbled onto a peculiar plant called *Trem Autem Somno* listed in one of his brother's medicinal herbology books—Latin for Summoner of Sleep. The claim was that this powerful and unique plant could prevent all dreams. "A complete and total numbing," it read.

There were no accounts of the plant being grown and used for centuries, and even then, accounts of its use were spotty.

Although his brother was an expert in herbology, Vern grew cross with Claude upon even mentioning the name *Trem Autem Somno*. Vern warned that the plant was "tainted and dangerous."

Claude didn't mention his plan to stop Ryder's dreams using the plant, and instead contacted his brother's intricate network of international apothecaries for more information.

Discouraged that not one of them knew how to access *Trem Autem Somno* or where it came from, each reacted like Vern, citing that not enough was known and it was dangerous. But Claude continued to take matters into his own hands.

In college, he had befriended a petite woman with high-

piled coppery hair named Belinda Chase who majored at the top of her class in chemistry and botany. He kept a close friendship with her over the years, hoping to take her on a proper date one day once her husband passed, but the timing still wasn't right. She was happy to oblige his request to unravel the riddle of *Trem Autem Somno* though.

It took Belinda four days to inform Claude that the plant could be traced to one location in the world—a foggy mountain town nestled in the Sierra Mountains called Marble Woods. There was a single account in a history book of a hermit discovering the plant, growing bushels of it on his property, and then disappearing.

Claude was so excited by the lead that he didn't waste any time pulling out his maps. Unable to locate Marble Woods, he headed to the library and spent hours in their archives, wondering why Marble Woods didn't appear on any of their maps either. The only explanation that the librarian could provide was, "the country is riddled with small mountain towns. Some are so small they aren't known to folks who don't live there."

Claude contacted city planners, architects, cartographers, historians, and anyone who might help him, but no one could. He left messages, wrote letters, met dozens of people, but still, nothing presented itself on the whereabouts of Marble Woods or how to obtain Summoner of Sleep.

Devastated, Claude planned to meet Belinda at his favorite café to discuss their findings over breakfast, but Belinda never showed despite her predictable punctuality. He had forgotten his cell phone at home, so he used the café's phone to call her laboratory. There was no answer, and her voicemail was full.

He worried about her, and to be safe, he went to check on her.

He drove to the outskirts of town and arrived at the laboratory several minutes later. He hated the hospital-like appearance of the building, which made him think of his deceased wife who

died in one.

The front door was unlocked, so he let himself in and walked down a long corridor checking the name plates until he found her office.

The door skirted open to reveal hoards of torn books and broken furniture, flickering lights, and mounds of shredded paper. The lab's phonenumber was severed and some of the buttons were ripped out of the phone. The most alarming thing though was a trail of blood leading out the broken window overlooking the woods.

He skimmed the room and checked for any signs of life.

"Belinda?"

Claude's spine tingled. He didn't move as he listened to the ticking of the wall clock. He took a shaky step backward, exited through the office door, and closed it.

He speed-walked out of the building and to his car, locked it right away, but still took the time to look over his shoulder.

She dug too deep.

He wailed like a caged animal. "Poor Belinda. My dear, sweet Belinda. I always loved you. My dear Belinda."

His face grew hot. His sausage-like fingers pulsed, and his wedding band dug deeper into his flesh. His heart raced so fast that if he didn't take his blood pressure medication soon, he'd end up in the emergency room again, but he had left it at home on the coffee table.

Claude started the car and did his best to calm his thoughts.

The trip took forever, and his fatigue prevented him from opening the medication bottle at home. He plopped down in his favorite chair and struggled with the stubborn plastic top for a few minutes, pried it open, and then gulped the pills without water. They wiggled down his esophagus and he sighed.

He pressed the light on his blinking answering machine on the table next to him.

"I have what you're looking for," the message said.

Claude's breathing problems and his duty to call the police

and report what he had seen at Belinda's laboratory ceased.

"Finally," he said with a smile.

—

Claude went through considerable trouble to obtain the plant and paid for it both monetarily and emotionally. The first transaction took place out of town under the veil of night when his war injury flared up the worst.

He never glimpsed whom he dealt with. All he knew was that the seller called himself *Achilles*. And when he returned home exhausted with the vials in tow, he forced himself to remember why he was doing this.

At first, it was to get enough money to move away, but his neighbor was helpless. Claude had drudged through a lonesome existence for such a long time and endured the pain that came with it. Ryder's struggle presented a prime opportunity to save someone from a solitary life like his. Helping Ryder gave him purpose again. It was his duty, his rescue mission.

Multiple times a day he performed the laborious task of sneaking into Ryder's home and placing Summoner of Sleep vials where Ryder would find them, hoping he'd either confuse them with his existing sleeping remedies or be so intrigued by their mysterious appearance that he would gulp them down. And it worked.

To Claude's amazement, the nightmare episodes ceased after one exposure, and he could now think without screams interrupting his thoughts.

Everything was fine until he witnessed Ryder rush home one day, park his car askew in the driveway, emerge with a crazed look in his eye and bolt into the garden. He appeared a minute later muttering about Vern and blood. Claude peaked through one of his telescopes from the downstairs window. Something red stained his neighbor's clothes.

Was that blood? Hadn't Julie said that Ryder could be dangerous?

Troubled, Claude left his home and ventured to Vern's apothecary where he discovered a similar scene to that of Belinda's laboratory—blood trailing into the woods.

—

There was no sign of Ryder for two whole days, and the uncomfortable lump in Claude's throat grew to a monumental level. He paced in front of the window and thought of his missing brother and Belinda. He needed answers, to crack the riddle. He watched the house day and night, leaving his station to shave and urinate, but he didn't see so much as a light or hear a sound. This made him even more unsettled than the screams.

He had to go into the house and investigate.

When it turned dark, he crept across the damp lawn in his slippers, skirting the bushes and vines like a cat burglar. He pressed his face against Ryder's living room window, but it was black inside. Then he grasped the sticky knob of the back door.

It swished open.

Claude crept inside and found the light switch on the adjacent wall. He wavered for a moment, fearing that once he turned it on, he might find another trail of blood.

What if there was nothing at all, and this project would end?

Claude inhaled with a wheeze and flicked on the light, which revealed a body in a fetal position in the middle of the hardwood floor surrounded by dozens of empty Summoner of Sleep vials.

The stench hit Claude hard and he plugged his nose.

Ryder's skin was blue and covered in bulging purple veins, a mound of crusted foam had settled at the sides of his mouth, and his own filth covered him.

Claude wanted to cry, but he made himself approach the body and crouched down next to it.

"What have I done to you?"

His head fell to his chest and his glasses slid off his face and hit the floor, but he didn't care. As he knelt, his hand grazed

Ryder's cold arm. Claude wept. There were no words for what he was other than a cold-blooded murderer.

Guilt raced through his body, but then Claude thought he sensed something beneath his hand. Was that a pulse?

Claude wiped his tears. "Oh, thank God." He shook the body. "Come on, Ryder...wake up." He didn't stir. Ryder's blue cheeks bloomed bright red from Claude's repeated slaps. "Wake up dammit."

Ryder lay silent and still. He was still under the influence of Summoner of Sleep and it might take hours for him to awaken.

Claude went home to retrieve his best flannel blanket, a pair of pajamas, and some extra slippers. He then changed Ryder's clothes and swaddled him in the warm blanket.

For hours Claude sat next to his unresponsive neighbor, checking his pulse and adjusting the blankets every so often.

It must have been two or three o'clock in the morning when a violent shock erupted in the corpse-like body.

"Yes." Claude let out a joyful squeal and flung himself next to his neighbor, cradling his delicate head in his big, flabby arms.

"J-Julie?" gurgled Ryder. His eyes eased open and panned up.

Claude smiled and tilted Ryder's head back so close that he smelled Ryder's dank and rotten breath. Ryder's onyx eyes locked on his. Claude reached for a glass of water and held it to his neighbor's indigo lips.

"Here. Drink something."

Claude poured half of it down Ryder's throat, but he spat it out and knocked the glass away. The water rained across the pajamas and the glass spun across the floor.

A violent tremble permeated Ryder's sallow limbs. His pulse grew stronger. He stared straight up at Claude. Mouth open, lips parted. Frozen.

Claude stroked Ryder's translucent skin and whispered, "Hello, Ryder. It's okay. I'm here. I saved you. They're gone now."

Chapter 3

Ryder

Ryder repeated the phrase in his head. *They're gone now.* For the life of him, he had no idea what happened or what exactly was gone now. The world was so dark and blurry he couldn't even understand who had spoken, just that the person sounded out of breath like someone had punched them in the gut.

The cold night air and a nauseating potpourri scent whirled toward him.

All his energy melted into the floor. He tried to wiggle his fingers and toes but couldn't. His gaze flickered around the room.

A clock ticked in the background.

Was this hell?

As he lay there taking in the faint light from the room, a shadow hovered above him. It was too big to be Julie. Too plump to be Vern. Perhaps it was his stepfather coming to finish what he had started all those years ago? He would never forget the argument about his sleepwalking when he was a boy, which

got so heated that he knocked Ryder out in one punch. The next thing he recalled was water smacking into his face and opening his eyes to discover his stepfather laughing, repeating, “Can’t you take a punch, you sissy?” His nose broke in two places that day, and his sunken eyes remained dark purple for weeks. Recalling the pain of his nose breaking and the dreadful smell of dried blood and backed-up snot inside his sinuses sickened him.

Then everything got mixed up and blurry again. The memory melted away and a violent tremor shot through his body. He shouted a flurry of loud, inarticulate curses, his inner voice yelling at him, “Go back to sleep, you fool.”

The shadowy figure leaned forward, right in his face.

“I’m so glad you’ve come back,” the voice said. “How are you feeling now that you’re awake?”

Ryder came out of his trance and saw the muddy brown eyes in the gray light, the wavy squirrel-colored hair, and the bright red capillaries sprayed across the nose and cheeks of his dumpy old neighbor, Claude Wick.

“W-what are you doing h-here?” Ryder mustered the strength to say.

“I’m here to help you.”

“G-get out.”

“You don’t understand.”

“You’re t-trespassing.” Ryder kicked off the flannel blanket and too-big slippers.

“Don’t move so fast. Your body has had quite a shock.”

“No.”

“Please. Let me first explain. I introduced you to a special plant. *Trem Autem Somno*. It means Summoner of Sleep. Those vials. I put them in your house.”

“You did w-what?”

“I put vials of Summoner of Sleep in your house. It can change your life. It already has.”

“S-Summoner of Sleep?”

“Yes, but I grew worried when I didn’t see you for a few days, so I came to check on you and I’m glad I did.”

“Days?” Ryder’s eyes bulged.

“Yes. You’ve slept the entire time. The good news is that *Trem Autem Somno* is meant to stop your nightmares. As I’ve monitored you, I haven’t heard any screams. There are no marks on your body either. Maybe you’re cured now.”

Drool poured from the sides of his lips and tickled his chin. His body vibrated and stung, which prevented him from getting up from the floor.

“You’re in a state of shock right now, but I believe that soon you will realize the tremendous benefit of Summoner of Sleep,” Claude said. “You will be able to live a normal life again with the power of this special plant. You just need to consume it in smaller doses, that’s all. I never imagined you’d take so much of it. I only put the vials out to encourage you to take it.”

Ryder’s eyes opened wider. “W-what day is...is it?”
“September first.”

Ryder inhaled the foul scent of his urine. His gaze lowered to see his neighbor’s stomach fat bulge from beneath his shirt. He recoiled.

Claude pulled his shirt down. “Due to the amount you ingested, I couldn’t wake you up sooner. We should get you to an emergency room. You don’t look so good.”

“W-why...why did you wake me?” he choked; his throat full of dust. “I was h-happy asleep. So happy.”

Claude repositioned himself, which exposed another fat roll. “I had to. If I didn’t wake you, then you would’ve died. In fact, I thought you were dead at first.” He reached for Ryder’s arm. “Come on, let’s get you to the hospital.”

Ryder couldn’t take being pitied like this any longer, and he sure as hell didn’t like Claude touching him. He pulled away, rolled on his side, paused, and then rose to his feet with a groan. Perspiration broke out on his forehead and his eyes fluttered. The world was now a series of strange dream-like pictures

within a kaleidoscope.

“Are you okay?” asked Claude.

Ryder’s nerves were violin strings stretching tighter and tighter. His fingers and toes twitched and all the air in his chest squeezed out in one big push. Then he made eye contact again with his neighbor, which brought a cry of anger to his lips and he lurched toward the fireplace mantel. Tears and mucus poured from Ryder’s face. Saggy, old pajamas hung on his frame. That crazy man had changed his clothes.

“You should go to the hospital,” hummed Claude’s voice.

“Stop.” Ryder threw up a hand.

“Then come and lay down at my place. I have a spare guest room you could use.”

Ryder shook his head. He tightened his grasp on the mantel and reached for the fire poker with his free hand. “I can’t believe I live next door to such a...a l-lunatic.” He turned to see Claude’s confused expression.

“I’ve saved you. I don’t understand why you’d be so angry at me.”

“Angry? That’s nothing compared to what I feel for you.”

“But—”

“Get the hell out, you i-idiot.” Ryder’s voice approached a shriek as he swung the fire poker at Claude but bashed the floor instead.

“Just listen to me.” Claude backed away. “Let me explain how to use Summoner of Sleep so this doesn’t happen again... so you won’t die. It’s already changed your life, don’t you see?”

“You don’t know me. You don’t know a goddamn thing about m-me.”

“I know more than you think, Ryder. I know all about your struggles. I even know that Julie didn’t believe you and that she left you.”

The mention of her name crushed his soul like a thousand bricks. Anger boiled his blood, and he cracked the fire poker against the floor. “What’s the matter with you? Why are you so

involved with what's going on in my life? D-don't you have a life of your own?"

"I'm just trying to alleviate your suffering." Claude twisted his mustache at the side of his mouth into a sharp point.

"Alleviate my suffering?" cried Ryder. "If you want to do that, then g-give me more. Give me all the bottles you have of that stuff."

"I don't think it's a good idea to give you more."

"Give me more." Ryder raised the poker.

"But I, umm, I don't have any more. Besides, I'm not sure if there are any side effects yet, or how safe it is."

"You willingly gave me something u-unsafe?"

"Well, I wouldn't put it like that."

"You are c-crazy."

"Hey. You've tried a hundred other tonics without knowing the side effects, so how is Summoner of Sleep any different? Besides, I did research on how to stop the nightmares and learned of the plant from Marble Woods. It's said to numb the nightmares and it worked. That's what matters, right?"

Sweat beads dripped down his face. His fist clenched tighter. He blinked and raised the fire poker higher. "You're the reason for all of this. You drove me insane with those vials. Y-you exposed me to god knows what. You spied on me and broke into my house. You even dressed me. It's time to get the h-hell out of my house or I swear to God I'll kill you right here."

Claude scampered toward the front door like a scolded dog and stopped at the threshold. "Ryder, please, don't send me away. Just let me help you. I don't have anything going for me in my life either. I'm all alone over there too, so please let me do this one little thing for you. It would make me so happy to help you."

Ryder took two steps forward and stomped Claude's forgotten glasses beneath his shoe. "I'll kill you before I'd let that happen."

Chapter 4

Claude

Claude slammed the door.
Who did that stuffed shirt asshole think he was anyway? Ryder would wither and die without me.

He was drenched in sweat by the time he reached the far edge of the lawn, all the while, his mind flooded with what-ifs. He grasped the lamppost with one hand and ran over the chain of events. Whichever way he looked at it, the magnitude of the misfortune he had just encountered crushed his spirit into pieces.

Tears collected in his eyes.

“I’ve sacrificed everything for you, and you make it seem like I’m the insane one. Didn’t you know those were my favorite pajamas? No wonder your wife left you. Why no friends ever visited.” He panted. “You’re an asshole. Selfish asshole, Mr. Ashling.” He glowered at his neighbor’s unkempt garden where the wisteria had claimed the entire west side of the house. There was no sound in the entire neighborhood, just his hoarse voice

spewing hatred. “You have no idea what I had to do to obtain the tonic. No idea. We are both alone. Don’t you get it? I’ll get you for this.”

His mind raced. The last person to see his brother was Ryder. Another reason to despise him. Claude recalled the parade of lights blinking from the yard several days ago. The police had come, but given Ryder’s comatose state, it prevented him from answering the door, and with the foreclosure sign on the front door, the police must have assumed he left town, so no more questions were asked.

Claude couldn’t help but imagine that beyond Ryder’s innocent exterior wickedness puppeteered him. The psychiatrist had said he could be dangerous.

Was Ryder the reason for the disappearance of Vern and Belinda?

He now frowned at his own house ravaged by wild plants. Ragged weeds and bugs ran rampant—a further indication of how much he abandoned everything in his life for Ryder.

Unsure whether to return home, his gaze was drawn to a figure illuminated by the moon—black tentacles jerked and whipped around inside his neighbor’s living room.

He rubbed his eyes and dabbed sweat from his forehead. He blinked, and the figure vanished. Ryder’s house was black again—like his selfish soul.

Claude was glad it was gone, though the sight still sent a rush of adrenaline through his veins. A sharp pain pierced his hand and he realized he had swiped a bottle of Summoner of Sleep that dug into his palm.

How did you get here?

Claude couldn’t recall picking it up or even touching it, but here it was, swirling with glittering emerald secrets. And even though it was still corked, his nose could detect its gingery, earthy scent from inside the bottle. The substance beckoned to be released. Guilt no longer hung over him for having given Ryder the tonic without knowing the side effects, or for the fact

that he hadn't been brave enough to take the stuff himself.

"You get whatever is coming to you," he said with such violence that it spooked some creature in the bushes.

As his gaze plunged into the depths of the enigmatic liquid, a wave of anger washed over him. He cast the bottle into the ground with all his might.

"Ha." The liquid from the cracked bottle seeped into the ground.

Claude inhaled. The fragrant gingery scent came with a peppery kick. Just as he was getting ready to weep into the cold night air, a bright light shot through his mind and body and absolved all the dark, hopeless thoughts that plagued him. It was as if he had taken a shot of moonshine.

A jubilant, surprised cry escaped his crooked lips, and liquid trickled from his ear down his neck. Curious, he touched it and gazed upon blood.

"That's funny." Claude rubbed his thumb and index finger together. "That didn't happen to Ryder."

Claude smiled. Then a new sensation consumed his body—like the sun peeking through the clouds on a cool day. He was lucid, his body uplifted with magic—all smoke, stars, and fairy dust.

As he stared entranced at the crimson blood, a far-off call swept through the empty street and enraptured him in a tunnel of dead leaves and night magic. Claude's neck hair stood on end and he got a funny feeling that he was being watched.

"Brother?" He looked around. Without his glasses, everything was blurry shadows. "Is that you?"

The call echoed louder, and Claude turned toward the blackness of the woods at the end of the lane.

"Brother?" He stepped into the street.

Claude's aged muscles pulsed with hot invigorated blood as if awakened for the first time since he was a teenager. The limp that had plagued him since the war ceased its incessant throb, and he now stood tall with perfect posture. A peculiar warmth

bloomed deep within his chest and his lungs felt free and clear. His heartbeat thundered and a euphoric cry erupted from his lips.

He rushed across the street—and the farther and faster he ran, the more the pain in his body dissolved.

Claude rubbed his spot-free, smooth hands and touched the taut cheeks with glee. He had reached the edge of the woods a changed man.

A sheet of torrential rain fell from the sky and thunder shook the whole town as Claude took a step onto a patch of pine needles. He smiled again and gazed at his new and stealthy body as it carried him deep into the forest despite the sky drenching him. Claude didn't realize he was laughing until hours later, but he didn't care—it was his last expulsion of an old, wretched body and life, and the beginning of a new chapter.

Chapter 5

Ryder

When the woods enveloped his neighbor, he smiled. “Good. Don’t come back, you big fat looney.”

Ryder kicked the Summoner of Sleep bottles as he staggered toward the kitchen. His stomach grumbled, but only a few expired cans of tomato soup remained in the bare cupboards. He pulled the pop-top and guzzled it cold as he gazed out the window at his neighbor’s forgotten yard.

The little pond in front of the neighbor’s house had become a swamp of putrid black water. Frogs and strange white fish lived there despite the clogged fountain spouts. He couldn’t stand to see such a messy sight next to his home—then he remembered the eviction notice. He only had a few more days to remain in the house.

Ryder rubbed his hands across his eyes, dislodging the crustiness that had gathered at his tear ducts. A glimmer from his neighbor’s downstairs window caught his gaze.

He squinted at the circular object that peeked through the

heavy drapes.

“A telescope? I don’t believe this shit.”

Ryder stormed out of the kitchen and through the back door, strode across the lawn, and entered through the front door of his neighbor’s unlocked house.

The scent of must, shoe polish, and mature flesh wafted up to his nostrils. He stepped across the Aubusson carpet in the foyer and paused. He flicked on an old lamp and jolted at the black insects that scurried into their hiding places.

Disgusting slob.

He took another step and tripped on dozens of amber bottles scattered across the floor with illegible labels.

When he looked up his heart stopped.

The floral walls overflowed with photographs pinned alongside formulas, sketches of plants, and incoherent notes about lack of sleep. The photographs documented a variety of Ryder’s facial expressions, but the majority were of him crying, illuminated by the faint lights in his upstairs bathroom.

“What the fuck?” He ripped a photo off the wall.

He glanced around the room full of junk—stacks of weathered notebooks, yellowed newspapers, piles of dirty clothes, shoeboxes full of medications. He marched over to a pile of notebooks and pulled a smallish one with scuffed corners and smeared markings from the top. He rifled the pages with one thumb. It smelled of tissue-thin paper and sweat.

There was a passage about the origin of Summoner of Sleep, another about how its creator vanished, and how Marble Woods couldn’t be found on a map. Then there was a peculiar passage that offered extensive evidence about the magic of plants and provided a set of theories concerning their nature, origin, and function.

a) plants are intelligent masterminds and do not sit idly in the dirt. Matter and energy flow through them, and so does concentrated and innate magic as old as time.

b) this magic can be contained through a certain degree of

leakage, but if one drains too much magic, the plant will die. Genetic mutation and environmental factors result in evolution of plants and thus the evolution of their ever-changing magic.

c) plants are fragile and picky things. They have personalities and their adaptations are superbly inventive. Once their magic has been tapped into though, it cannot be closed by any means.

Claude's penmanship was shameful. Each sentence was a crude mix of capital letters and small letters all cramped together. His spelling was perfect though. Ryder heaved a breath of stale air and flung the notebook on the pile. For the next five minutes he thumbed through the remaining notebooks of more crowded letters accompanied by stippled drawings of plants in the margins.

He set it down and followed the muddy footprints upstairs to find a room packed with new horrors.

"Just when I thought you were already a psycho; I find that you collected the clocks I threw out from my nightmares and brought them back here." Ryder's hands went clammy. He slammed the door, tried to take a breath, but lost his balance. His head thumped against a table.

The world buzzed as he stared at the closed door from the ground as if the horrors inside it could still be seen. The exertion heightened his panic.

"You've got to relax," he said aloud and willed himself to stand. "They can't hurt you in reality."

He swallowed and slinked down the hallway. The air went stale. He was tired and wanted to go back to sleep, but another telescope positioned at the upstairs bedroom window sent him into a manic episode. Ryder marched up to it and peered through the lens of the telescope, which looked into his bathroom.

"That sick freak." Ryder kicked it over with a huff.

He turned, ready to punch something, and discovered daily journal recordings in a stack on the bureau. The journals detailed all his nightmare episodes with dates, times, and classifications

of screams heard in the night. They had been graded on a scale of one to ten in terms of severity, and there was even a space provided for additional notes, some of which detailed specific words or sounds he made at his most vulnerable moments in the night.

Ryder's hands shook as he turned page after page of the disturbing and intrusive notes. There were details about the clocks he awoke with. Their size, shape, weight, and color. There were hundreds of scribbles, random patterns, and detailed drawings of his eyes—both opened and closed. The detail was photographic.

A weepy metallic voice distracted him.

He darted an inquisitive glance around the room. There was movement, he was sure, somewhere in the empty bed on the opposite side of the room. Sweat trickled down his forehead. He couldn't breathe. A hollowness echoed in his chest.

"Claude?"

Ryder stared at the bed—right through it.

Had the pillow just moved?

Something rustled behind him.

His fists tightened and he turned.

The house fell quiet.

"Hello?"

Quiet.

He relaxed and heaved a sigh of relief that the sound had stopped.

He continued to scour Claude's writings into the dark morning hours and stopped on a passage that read:

June 1, 10:15 p.m.

Astounding. Even the origin of his name is destined. After conducting more research, I've discovered that the etymology of the name "Ryder" means "summoner" or "messenger." It's derived from the Old English "ridire." Then, there's his surname "Ashling." Its

etymology means “sleep” or “dream.” Its origin refers to an “Aisling,” a poetic genre developed in the 17th and 18th centuries. Although he appears stronger and in good spirits today, the dreams remain frequent. I’m still searching for a means to obtain the precious plant.

Conclusion: “Ryder” is the “Summoner of Sleep” himself. His name perfectly spells it out. That can’t be a coincidence. I’m convinced it’s intentional. I wonder what will happen once I find the plant.

~Claude Wick

Ryder recalled in his childhood that a stranger told him that his name had a powerful meaning, but he never thought twice about it until now. He pored over more entries.

August 24, 3:00 p.m.

The train of events that have plagued my neighbor would be enough to destroy the strongest man, yet he still stands. I watched as his wife left and now feel an inconsolable regret for not having stopped her had I known that he would’ve then lost his job as a result of taking the tonic and been faced with eviction shortly after. At first, I believed it was a series of bad luck, but upon closer inspection, I am now convinced it is the work of Summoner of Sleep. It wants him to seek solace in its arms. It all ties back to his name.

~Claude Wick

Another read:

August 28, 1:10 a.m.

I fear I have done great harm. Now that I have encountered it, it’s all I can think about, but the expense is too great, especially since Ryder must have it to stop the nightmares. If only I could eliminate the middleman and have access to Summoner of Sleep whenever I desired. Then I would be happy. But the task at hand is

much more difficult than expected. Marble Woods can't be found anywhere. All my connections haven't the slightest idea where this phantom town may even exist.

*I've received one report that the town became a settled community by a vagrant or pirate of some sort, but I've never been able to verify this account. Another report said that Marble Woods was founded by a fanatical preacher who had created his own religion. He called it *The Order of the Signature Saint Hood* or something to that effect, but then all the people who followed it vanished. It could all be hogwash, but I'm intrigued about this strange and ancient place—that is, if it does indeed exist anymore or ever did, for that matter.*

But one thing is clear to me now—selling my house isn't important to me anymore. What I've discovered in my naïve attempts to help Ryder is far too powerful and intriguing to shut the door on. I do not trust him, but I must rely on him. I am close. I can feel it.

~Claude Wick

The final entries were dated the previous day and seemed written by a different hand and person altogether:

August 31, 10:30 p.m.

I dare not sleep for fear of missing anything. I must remain awake always. The night is when the clues and answers like to find me like little mosquitos thirsting for my blood. Sweet blood.

~Claude Wick

His pulse ramped up. Ryder steadied the page to read his neighbor's final entry, the floor beneath him swelled and groaned as he read the unbelievable words his neighbor had written:

August 31, 11:47 p.m.

I tell you; I'll leave it all behind willingly. I will do it because I can. I'll leave all the black alleys of mortality and dank gloom of the cosmic doorways behind, the shallow pearls of filth, the starless metropolises of madness, and their septic arms. I'll leave behind the infinite cesspool of society to chase the imaginings I dream about. I can go, but he mustn't visit that place which leads to the origin of his nightmares. It will destroy us all if he does. But for me, I think I'll leave it all behind and go there. I think I'll go there and never look back. That would be quite nice.

~Claude Wick

Ryder dropped the notebook with a gasp.

He fixed his eyes on the hearth in front of him where gray embers smoldered in the ash. Whatever his neighbor had intended to destroy hadn't burned.

Ryder perked and snapped up the smoldering pages with his bare hands and blew out the remaining hot spots.

Despite the tremors of pain through his limbs and extreme fatigue, a smile lengthened across his cheeks at the realization that he now possessed a map to Marble Woods.

—

The enormous mass pulsed in his thigh, so swollen that the entire skin covered in black veins was ready to burst. The veins raised, spread, and pounded. Whatever pushed under his skin grew larger by the second. It ached and throbbed through every unbearable inch of dermis. Ryder's pants ripped open like confetti as he screamed in agony.

The mass grew bigger.

He tried to stand but fell.

"This is a dream. You're in a dream." He slithered across the floor and knocked over Claude's journals and furniture as

something danced and tore its way through the tendons and muscles.

Ryder tobogganed on a quilt down the stairs and crawled into the kitchen. His pulse thundered in his ears as he grabbed one of the knives and gritted his teeth.

The first cut of flesh was the hardest. The warm sensation of blood ran down his legs, which made him think of urine. His jaw tightened.

Ryder peeled back the folds of skin to reveal a clock stuck inside. Its gears and splinters twisted deep.

Fire raced up his leg and Ryder screamed.

“Get outta—”

He threw down the knife and pulled the clock with his bare hands, but the exposed gears turned, mashed, and mutilated his delicate skin like meat sliding through a grinder. The clock hands spun out of control and caught a large chunk of groin skin. The sound of ripping echoed through the room. His voice strained from the screams. Through the blood and goo, he read the words Summoner of Sleep carved upon its wooden face.

Ryder stuck his long, thin fingers inside the folds of his leg and pulled hard. He reached so far down he passed out from the pain, and when he woke, he yanked again at the stubborn clock.

This is a dream. This is a dream.

The clock tore through his skin. His teeth chattered nonstop when it was halfway out of him. A chill passed down his skin and he pried the clock free from his body with a tremendous jerk, then bashed it against the wall.