



WHAT HAPPENED IN THE CELLAR

by

Debbie Kuhn

“This place creeps me out.” Shelby tossed her overnight bag into the front passenger seat of her green VW Beetle. “Maybe you should borrow one of Avery’s watchdogs, at least until Mom and Dad get back from Florida.”

Lacey threw her younger sister an amused look. “It’s just an old house surrounded by some spooky looking trees. I feel perfectly safe here.”

They were standing in the gravel driveway by the carport. Shelby looked around, squinting in the mid-October sunshine. “I can’t believe Granny didn’t sell this place after Grandpa died. Now *we* have to worry about getting rid of it.”

“I hope it doesn’t sell right away. That’ll give me more time to decide if moving back here is the right thing to do.”

Shelby crossed her arms and smiled. “You started to relax as soon as you got here yesterday, and today you seem more like your old self. I don’t think you’ll miss Cincinnati. You’re still a country girl at heart.” Her expression became serious. “Besides, if I were you, I’d want to get as far away from Wayne Forman as I could possibly get.”

Lacey felt a chill run down her spine.

“He’d probably still be in prison if I’d had the guts to show up at his parole hearing,” she said, sighing.

“Maybe, maybe not. Men who beat their wives manage to get off way too easy most of the time. Wayne should’ve gotten life for what he did to you.”

Lacey’s throat tightened and she suddenly found it difficult to breathe. This happened to her every time she thought about the events that took place on that awful night five years earlier. The night her husband had put her in the hospital – and she had lost their unborn baby boy.

“Lord, I’m sorry, Lace. I didn’t mean to upset you.” Shelby moved forward and put an arm around her sister’s shoulders. “You need to sit down?”

Lacey shook her head. “I’ll be okay.” She pushed back a lock of her honey-blond hair, and met Shelby’s troubled blue gaze. “Really, I feel better now. You should get on the road, Miss Thacker. You know you don’t like to travel after dark.”

Later that evening, Lacey walked out onto the front deck of her parents' log house with Thomasina, her mother's silver tabby, hot on her heels. She had just fed the lonely cat, and it was purring at fifty decibels. Lacey rested her arms on the railing and took in the glorious view, while Thomasina rubbed against her legs.

The temperature was still pleasant; she felt comfortable in her jeans and flannel shirt.

It was the best time of year to visit Misty Hollow. The shimmering scarlet hills looked like they'd been set ablaze, and the crisp autumn breeze smelled of apples, dry leaves, and wood smoke.

From this lofty vantage point, she could see Grandma Millie's white Gothic-style farmhouse across the way, and her garden to the south, filled with bright orange pumpkins. A creek snaked its way down the center of the valley, along with a paved road that followed the course of its eastern bank. Farther south around the bend was Avery Bishop's little place. Lacey could see smoke spiraling into the air from the old man's woodstove.

Just to the north, on the other side of the creek, was a small Pentecostal church. The Sunday evening service was in full swing, and the faint sound of the worshipers' heartfelt singing reached Lacey's ears.

It was all so familiar – and comforting. Eleven years had passed since she had moved away from Misty Hollow to attend college in the “big city.” She had meant to come back to Kentucky after graduation. Her parents – both teachers – had longed for her to follow in their footsteps.

Lacey would have done so if she hadn't met Wayne. He was a star football player, and the handsomest guy she'd ever seen. Her perfect blond prince had made her feel like a princess.

Their wish for a fairy tale wedding came true right after graduation. But it hadn't taken long for the honeymoon to end.

Shelby phoned around 9:00 that night to let her sister know she had made it safely back to Lexington. As soon as the call ended, Lacey took a hot, scented bubble bath.

She stayed submerged in the claw-footed tub until her skin began to look like the surface of a prune. When she got out, she smoothed on some lotion and slipped her pink cotton nightshirt over her head. Then she padded across the hall into her grandparents' bedroom and climbed into their sturdy four-poster.

Lacey curled up in the center of the high bed, under a pile of handmade quilts, and listened to the eerie music being made by the wind-whipped trees that stood all around the one-story home. Every once in a while an acorn would fall from the giant oak right outside her window, and she would hear it land on the slate roof.

The frame structure did a lot of creaking and groaning even when it wasn't windy. Lacey was used to the strange noises, but it still took her over an hour to fall asleep.

She was dreaming about her grandmother when it happened.

A woman's piercing scream suddenly ripped through the night, nearly stopping Lacey's heart. She sat bolt upright in bed, trembling in the pitch darkness.

The sound of running footsteps reached her next. She slid over and switched on the dim reading lamp that sat next to the Big Ben alarm clock. It was 1:44 A.M.

Time to face the nightmare. She knew she couldn't open any of the bedroom windows. They were old and warped. The only phone in the house – besides her useless cell phone – was sitting on the kitchen counter, along with her purse and car keys.

And Grandma Millie had hated guns.

Sweet Lord. Someone was ransacking the place. Furniture was being overturned and lamps were being smashed. What was she going to do? Her heart was pounding so fast and hard she was afraid it might burst.

Think, Lacey. You've got to get away.

She jumped out of bed and grabbed a hefty vase off the dresser. Should she hide behind the bedroom door and wait, or confront the intruder head on? Taking a deep, shaky breath, she stepped into the hall and flipped on the light.

The noise stopped, and Lacey noticed that the wind had died. The silence was just as frightening.

She waited for a long minute and then tiptoed barefoot down the hall. The light above her began to flicker as she stepped off the chilly hardwood floor onto the area rug in the living room.

She switched on a lamp. Everything looked normal.

The kitchen was on her right. She lifted her makeshift weapon a little higher and entered the room cautiously.

Not a thing out of place. Incredible.

Lacey found the light switch and hurriedly crossed the cold tile floor to the back entrance.

The door was still locked.

Her shoulders slumped in relief. She set the vase on the edge of the gray Formica counter.

Better check the front door, just to be safe.

She was halfway across the kitchen when the overhead light went out. Lacey sucked in her breath and froze, every muscle tensed. Her eyes were immediately drawn to the cellar door on her left. A faint glow came from the gap at the bottom.

She wanted to run, but something wouldn't let her. A force stronger than her fear was drawing her to the cellar. She couldn't tear her eyes away from the door.

As she watched, it slowly swung open on its creaky hinges, releasing the icy, damp air that had been trapped below. The glowing light bulb that hung from the stairwell's ceiling swung back and forth, casting wild shadows across the room.

Lacey felt her knees turn to mush. She stumbled towards the kitchen table and gripped the back of a chair for support. Her head was spinning.

"I can't go down there. I'm not ready."

She couldn't believe she had said the words out loud – and to whom?

There was no real intruder here. No living person, anyway. She was sure of that.

Lacey pulled out the high-backed chair she had been holding on to and sank into it. The light bulb in the stairwell gradually stopped swinging and the kitchen began to feel warmer as she sat there thinking, trying to make sense of it all.

But she couldn't. Not yet.

The overhead light flickered back on.

Lacey got up before her courage could fail her and quickly closed the cellar door.

She'd left the light bulb burning.

Lacey slept late the next morning. When she awoke, she wanted to believe that the frightening events of the night before had simply been a bad dream, or a product of her imagination. But she knew better.

After making the bed, she put on a pair of soft jeans and a red plaid shirt, slipped on her leather moccasins, and made her way down the hall to the kitchen.

Feeling brave in the light of day, she marched straight over to the cellar door and yanked it open. The light bulb was still glowing. No rush of arctic air, though. She looked down the uneven wooden stairs and saw a bushel basket of chestnuts sitting at the bottom. Some were still encased in their spiny burs – now brown instead of green – and a few had fallen onto the cement floor.

Lacey gave herself a mental pep talk as she eased down the stairs. A dank, musty smell soon reached her nostrils. When she got to the bottom step, she flipped on another, brighter light and looked around. Besides the furnace and the new hot water heater, all she saw were shelves filled with canned goods, worktables, an old wringer washing machine, and the stand-alone shower her grandfather had used each day after coming home from the mines.

There was nothing scary about any of that.

She gingerly picked up the wicked looking burs one at a time and laid them back in the basket. She would have to get rid of them all later.

Once upstairs, Lacey wrestled a short stepladder out of the pantry and, for her own peace of mind, set about replacing most of the light bulbs in the house. When she was finished, she decided to have breakfast on the covered back porch.

It was mild and sunny, another perfect fall day. Squirrels were playing tag in the spacious backyard, and all the birds sang cheerfully, as though they were competing to see who had the loudest, sweetest song.

Lacey took a bowl of bran cereal and a mug of strong, black coffee out to the cedar table and sat facing the south garden. But she didn't have much of an appetite. She couldn't stop thinking about the previous night – and her serious brush with the supernatural.

She knew very little about the history of her grandparents' house, other than the fact that they had bought the place sixty-eight years ago, right after they were married. Her Grandpa Sim had gradually updated the home. After a long battle with black lung, he had passed away in the hospital when Lacey was fourteen.

This past July, Grandma Millie had died of heart failure right there on the carport. Lacey's father had found her lying next to the back steps with a broom still in her hand and a peaceful expression on her face.

Surely both her grandparents were at rest now.

Lacey didn't understand the significance of the sights and sounds she had experienced. Perhaps they had something to do with the original owners, whoever they

were. She found it odd that her grandparents had never mentioned any strange goings-on in the house while they were alive.

The elderly couple had told Lacey and Shelby many a ghost story, which they swore were true. Maybe they had kept quiet about their own haunting so she and her sister would not be afraid to spend the night.

Lacey leaned back in her wooden chair, coffee mug in hand, and let a wide grin spread across her face. Shelby had always been easily spooked, and when they were kids, Lacey had been her gleeful tormentor. Their grandparents' property had been the perfect place for Halloween pranks.

Her smile faded. She wished that last night's hair-raising incident had only been the result of Shelby's long-awaited revenge.

Lacey dreaded nightfall, but at the same time, her curiosity had been piqued. She wondered if the phenomena she had witnessed would be repeated – if there were a reason, a higher purpose, for her involvement. She was afraid to tell her family, or Avery, about the experience. They would probably just think she was having a nervous breakdown.

To get her mind off of her unusual situation, she tuned the static-prone old radio in the living room to a country music station and kept herself busy with cleaning chores. She polished the oak fireplace first, and then went on a dusting rampage.

The three-bedroom home was filled with an eclectic assortment of furniture, dating from the 1930s on up to the 1980s. Even though the interior had a certain amount of

charm, Lacey knew she would have to be ruthless if she ever moved into the house permanently.

She vacuumed all the rugs next, and then mopped the kitchen floor. When supertime rolled around, she was still trying to tidy up the built-in bookcase in the living room. Figurines, framed photos, old books, and an assortment of bibles, were all vying for space among the shelves.

Lacey decided to take a break after discovering several photo albums that were stuck together on the bottom shelf. She slapped together a ham and cheese sandwich, grabbed a Coke out of the fridge, and settled down in an overstuffed armchair in the living room. She leafed through the photo albums as she ate.

The naked baby pictures of her dad made her giggle – and she was amazed at how beautiful her grandmother had once been. She found romantic photos of her parents' wedding day, and tons of nauseatingly sweet snapshots that were taken when she and her sister were little. People still told them that they looked like twins.

Lacey's mood darkened when she came across a lone photo that had been taken on her own wedding day. The young June bride, dressed in white satin and pearls, looked up at her with trusting blue eyes filled with hope and joy.

Lacey smiled bitterly. "Sometimes what you don't know *can* hurt you," she whispered.

A woman's bloodcurdling scream shattered the stillness of the night.

Lacey instantly jerked awake in the armchair, letting a lapful of photo albums slide off into the floor. Moonlight poured through the big picture window behind her, illuminating the room so well that her eyes barely needed time to adjust.

She glanced at the clock on the fireplace mantle as the sound of running footsteps reached her ears. It was 1:44 A.M. – again.

Lacey broke out in a cold sweat, her heart racing. The footsteps were so close.

It can't hurt you. Just be calm. There's no need to run.

She was afraid to move, and she didn't think she could stand if her life depended on it.

Lacey gasped as heavy objects began crashing to the floor around her. She could feel the vibration of each violent impact – but she couldn't see it happening. The room looked peaceful and ordinary.

The disturbance moved into the kitchen. Someone was running, chairs were being knocked over and glass was breaking. Then Lacey heard the unmistakable sound of a body tumbling down the cellar stairs.

This brought her to her feet. She had to investigate whether she liked it or not. She had to find out what had happened in this house. It was the only way to stop the haunting.

She hesitated for one nerve-racking moment, and then sprinted into the kitchen.

The cellar door was wide-open, the light bulb glowing softly. The silence that had fallen over the place was deafening.

Lacey backed up to the wall and flipped on the overhead light. It flickered and went out.

She began reciting the Lord's Prayer under her breath as she inched towards the cellar stairs. Crossing the kitchen seemed to take an eternity.

She paused at the top of the steps, and put a hand on the doorframe to steady herself.

There wasn't a body lying at the foot of the stairs – of course not. But the basket of chestnuts had been overturned.

Lacey shivered in the chilly air. She was supposed to go down there, wasn't she?

She grabbed hold of the handrail and made her way slowly down the crooked steps.

She was close to the bottom when she saw something out of the corner of her eye. She turned her head to the left and glanced around the cellar.

There it was – in the center of the basement – a pinpoint of light that was growing larger and brighter with each passing second.

Lacey hugged herself for comfort. Why wasn't she bolting up the stairs?

The ball of scintillating light moved closer, and Lacey sensed she had nothing to fear. The light was warm, and it radiated love – unconditional, protective and never-ending.

“Granny?” Lacey blinked away her tears and descended the stairs, stepping around the fallen basket of chestnuts.

The bright light, which had shifted into an elongated, wavering shape, was floating away from her towards the north side of the cellar. She followed it, intrigued and unafraid.

It paused in front of the north wall, and Lacey got closer. The sparkling light was so beautiful. She reached out, wanting to touch it, but it moved right through a row of shelves and disappeared into the cinderblock wall.

Lacey felt a chill return to the basement air, as she stood bewildered in the semi-darkness. What was behind the wall? Was there a door hidden somewhere? She would have to move the row of shelves, heavy with canned goods, to find out.

“But not now. In the morning, first thing, I promise.”

Lacey felt physically and emotionally drained. Her heart longed to believe that the mysterious light she had seen had been the spirit of her sweet, harmless grandmother.

But even if it wasn't true, one thing was certain: There was an entity occupying the house, and it was trying to tell her something.

The mist hung low and heavy on the hills, bringing a damp chill to the early morning air. Lacey retrieved a flashlight from the glove compartment of her car and hurried back into the house.

She was eager to send the earthbound spirit on its peaceful way. The key to doing so had to be in the cellar.

After righting the bushel basket and gathering up the chestnuts, Lacey began removing all the canned goods from the shelving that stood against the north wall. The mason jars were filled with every type of fruit and vegetable in existence. She loaded the goods into some boxes she had found under the stairwell and then stacked them on the worktables that were lined up on the west side of the basement.

The wooden shelving had no backboard. Lacey carefully moved the rickety pieces forward so she could view the cinderblock wall.

She didn't see a door, but there was something else – another opening, with a gray metal cover. She walked to the other end and moved the shelving out farther so she could reach it. The opening looked to be about two feet high and two feet wide.

There was a handle on the right. Lacey pulled it down and the little door swung open with a hideous screech.

Her heart began to beat a little faster.

She switched on her flashlight and aimed it inside. The rays picked out pieces of glistening coal that were scattered all about. A wooden-handled shovel lay just past the opening on the raised cinderblock floor.

A coal bin. The old furnace must have been taken out over thirty years before.

Lacey took a deep breath and leaned inside the doorway, letting the beam of her flashlight roam around the interior. An adult could stand up inside, easy. There was another opening at the top of the back wall, in the center, that had a short wooden chute attached. It was where the coal was shoveled in – where the carport was now. She saw little piles of the black stuff here and there, and a lot of dust. The bin was virtually empty.

So, what were you expecting – a human skeleton crumpled in a corner, with irons and chains hanging out of the wall around it?

She sneezed.

This mystery wasn't going to be so easy to solve.

Lacey waxed her white Taurus until it reflected the cool sunlight like a mirror. Then she tackled the inside of the car. Her thoughts were on the past, and the paranormal puzzle she was trying to piece together.

Obviously, something bad had happened to someone in her grandparents' house – in the cellar, and perhaps the coal bin. But why hadn't she heard about it, especially if her grandmother had been involved?

Maybe it wasn't Granny's spirit that had appeared.

But it had *felt* like her. Why couldn't a ghost just speak its mind instead of beating around the bush?

Lacey was bent over, fishing out the loose change that had collected at the bottom of the cup-holder, when she heard tires crunching gravel.

She raised her head and saw Avery's battered red pickup lumbering up the driveway. The widower's two large mutts were sitting in the bed of the truck with their tongues lolling out, and goofy grins on their reddish-brown faces. They yelped a greeting as Avery pulled up alongside her car and killed the truck's noisy engine.

He rolled down his window, and Lacey noticed that he was wearing his usual attire: a pair of bibbed overalls and a denim work shirt.

"Little girl, you ain't changed a bit. Looks like I still need to fatten you up some."

Lacey got out of her car, grinning. "Don't tell me you finally found Sarah's recipe for burgoo?"

He grinned back at her, showing off a set of perfect false teeth. "Smells good, don't it? I brought you a whole kettle full. You can have it for supper tonight."

He tapped the window behind him and his whining dogs shot out over the tailgate. They ignored Lacey and began investigating the property with their noses glued to the ground.

Avery opened his door and handed her the quart-sized metal pot, which had a heavy lid and a swinging handle.

“This is sweet of you, but you shouldn’t have gone to all that trouble.” Lacey gave his tall, thin frame a quick hug.

He turned red under his whiskers, his dark eyes smiling. “Well, I feel I should’ve done more for Millie after Sim passed on. I can’t tell you how many dried apple pies that woman made for me over the years.”

“Feeding people was a hobby for her. And she was crazy about you.”

He shook his head. “I miss her, and I know y’all do too. When does Fred and Fiona get home?”

“Next week – unless Mom talks Dad into staying away longer.”

“Well, just holler if you need me.” The old man whistled shrilly. “Gus, Rusty, get on up here!”

The dogs immediately came loping back and jumped into the bed of the truck, dripping wet from their frolic in the creek. Lacey backed up in a hurry as they vigorously shook off the excess water.

Avery shut his door and turned the key in the ignition, eyeing the ominous-looking clouds that had suddenly obscured the sun.

“Looks like a storm’s rolling in after all,” he said, raising his voice over the clanking of the engine. “You be careful – and tell that little sister of yours to come see me next time she’s around.”

Thunder shook the house, making the windowpanes rattle. The lightning was intense. To Lacey, it sounded as if a battle for good and evil were being waged in the heavens. She hoped the good side won and there were no human casualties.

The power went off around 10:00 that night and it still had not been restored when she went to bed at midnight. She curled up under the patchwork quilts, listening to the wind howl and the rain pound against the roof, thinking she wouldn’t be able to fall asleep. But she was wrong.

Eventually, she began to dream.

It was morning. Sunlight poured through the window, and the aroma of fruit pies baking in the oven wafted into her room, coaxing her out of bed. She followed the tantalizing smell to the kitchen. No one else was in the house, but she heard a noise outside, a rhythmic swishing sound.

She went out the back door and around to the carport.

An elderly woman stood there with her back to Lacey, sweeping off the concrete. She was wearing a light blue housedress and matching slippers. Her snow-white braids were arranged in a neat bun.

Lacey couldn’t see her face, but she knew it was her grandmother.

“Granny?” She moved up behind the woman and gently touched her shoulder.

“Granny, I thought you were gone.”

Grandma Millie turned and looked at her with sad blue eyes. Her kind, wrinkled face wore a solemn expression.

“He’s coming, child,” she said. “He’s coming now.”

The dream woke Lacey just before the glass shattered. The sound came from the back of the house, and this time she knew she was in real danger.

She tried to turn on the reading lamp, but it wouldn’t work. The power was still out.

Lightning illuminated the bedroom. It was 1:44 A.M.

Her mouth went so dry she was afraid she was going to choke.

Lacey tumbled out of bed, shaking uncontrollably. She stepped clumsily into her moccasins and felt around on the dresser for her small flashlight. The vase was still sitting on the kitchen counter.

Her frantic fingers brushed against the flashlight, setting it into motion. She heard it land on the hardwood floor and roll away.

Stop wasting time. It’s now or never.

Lacey crept out of the bedroom and peered down the hall. She couldn’t see or hear anyone.

She decided to make a run for it and escape through the front door. Her legs felt numb, but she held her breath and forced herself to move forward, gaining speed as she entered the living room.

The man appeared in front of her with the ease of an apparition. He blocked her escape as lightning lit up the night, revealing his distorted features and the long, gleaming knife he held in his hand.

Lacey stared up at him in horror and disbelief. And then she screamed – screamed like a trapped, tortured animal that knows it’s going to die, and knows it won’t be soon enough.

Wayne lunged at her, knocking over an end table and smashing a lamp.

Lacey fled into the dark kitchen, heading for the back door. She tripped over the leg of a chair and went sprawling.

No, please, help me Jesus. Please don’t let this happen.

Wayne hauled her up by the hair and laid the butcher knife against her throat. He reeked of cigarette smoke and hard liquor.

She let out a whimper, too terrified to cry.

“You stupid little bitch,” he said. “Did you really think you could get away from me, that I’d just forgive and forget? These last few years have been a living hell, thanks to *you.*”

He yanked her head back, pressing the knife blade into her flesh and drawing blood. She could feel the drops of warm liquid running down her neck.

Lightning filled the room and she saw the sickness, the hatred, in his eyes.

“Please.” Lacey’s knees buckled and she leaned back against the kitchen counter. Tears sprang to her eyes: Her hair was being pulled out by the roots.

“Please, oh *please,*” Wayne said, mocking her. “Poor Lacey’s all alone. Poor Lacey’s going to get what’s coming to her.”

Lacey reached out and found the vase that was sitting behind her on the counter. Then she found the strength to swing it forward, knocking the knife from his hand. She turned sideways and slammed the vase across his right kneecap.

An agonized grunt escaped his lips. He let go of her hair and sank to the floor on his good knee. She jumped past him and swung the vase around again, but he latched on to her ankle, causing her to lose her balance and her grip on the vase. It shattered as she fell backwards onto the tile floor.

Thunder rolled and lightning flashed, and they both saw the butcher knife under the table, just inches away.

Wayne scrambled towards the razor-sharp weapon, and Lacey knew she didn't have a chance.

Run to the cellar. Run.

She got to her feet and flew blindly across the room to the cellar door. Her fingers found the doorknob instantly. She could hear Wayne stumbling after her, knocking over chairs in his haste.

He was closer than she thought. Before she could close the cellar door, he lashed out with the knife and cut her across the left arm. The pain made her dizzy, but she didn't let it slow her down.

He lashed out again and she slammed the door on his arm with all the force she could muster. The knife fell out of his hand and clattered down the basement steps.

Wayne bellowed with rage. He grabbed the back of Lacey's nightshirt as she started down the stairs, but she turned and fought him, raking her fingernails across his face, trying to reach his eyes.

He clamped a hand over her wounded arm, and she thought she would faint. Her blood was dripping onto the steps, and as he tried to drag her backwards, his foot slipped and they both slid down the rough wooden stairs, hitting the basket of chestnuts at the bottom.

Lacey tried to crawl away, but Wayne grabbed her by the legs and flipped her over onto her back. He began moving forward to straddle her.

Sobbing, she reached out into the blackness, searching for a weapon.

Wayne was going to strangle her, she knew. He was going to finish the job this time – and he would make sure she suffered first.

Lacey found her weapon.

She sat up and ground the chestnut bur into Wayne's face. He let out a shriek and rolled off of her, cursing.

She struggled to her feet and ran, hearing his miserable laughter follow.

“There's no way out for you, sweetheart,” he said. “You can run, but you can't hide forever.”

Lacey slowed down when she thought she was close to the north wall shelving. She eased behind it and found the door to the coal bin, cringing at the noise made by the rusty metal hinges.

After she climbed inside and pulled the door shut, she grabbed hold of the wooden-handled shovel and backed into a corner.

Lacey settled down to wait, coughing softly from the dust that had been disturbed by her entry. She could hear Wayne moving around the basement, throwing things and shouting obscenities.

“Lacey, honey, I slashed the tires on your pretty new car. You can’t even drive away. Come out, come out, wherever you are.”

She was cold, and she had lost enough blood to make her lightheaded. Maybe she would end up dying in the coal bin. Maybe she would haunt the place just like her grandmother.

There was a low rumble of thunder, and then Lacey heard a sound right outside the coal bin door. She got up stiffly and went to stand beside it, the shovel raised and ready.

She waited in this position for what felt like decades. Nothing. She couldn’t hear Wayne anymore.

Exhausted, Lacey returned to her corner, cradling the shovel. She wiped the tears off her face with the back of her sticky, bloody hand. She hadn’t even realized she was crying.

She stared into the pitch-blackness – and suddenly it wasn’t so dark anymore, it wasn’t so cold. She looked up and saw a pinpoint of light hovering near the ceiling.

It quickly expanded into a brilliant ball of pulsating energy.

Lacey stood, leaning back against the wall. She heard noises above her now – from outside. Her eyes fell on the wooden coal chute.

And she knew. She finally understood the simple truth: She could run, but she could never, ever hide.

The ball of light disappeared into the ceiling just as Wayne flung open the metal door above her head. He slid down the chute and landed solidly in the middle of the cinderblock floor.

Lacey could hear his heavy breathing.

He flicked his cigarette lighter on and turned around. There was a hammer in his left hand.

She stepped forward. "Goodbye, Wayne."

With every ounce of strength she still possessed, Lacey swung the shovel in a wide arc, striking the side of his head. The sickening sound echoed around the room as he crumpled to the floor.

She moved closer and stood over him in the darkness, listening. But there was only silence.

Lacey made sure the monster was dead before she left the coal bin. Despite the pain that wracked her body, she felt safe and calm. Nothing else could hurt her now.

All the lights were on when she went upstairs. The storm was over.

After calling the sheriff and wrapping her injured arm in a clean towel, she went out and sat on the front stoop, taking the night air deep into her lungs. She was covered with blood and coal dust, and the fresh, moist breeze felt good on her skin.

Lacey gazed up hopefully at the bright stars that stretched into eternity.

"I'm still here, Granny," she whispered. "And I'll never have to run again."

THE END