

Risen – The Breaking Dawn

By Vicki Gruenler, Michael Travler, and Gary Jr Gustafson

The Trouble Begins

Vicki hurried to her seat over the stares and whispers of her classmates. Ever since the incident where she had inexplicably known that Jeremy was lying, her peers had regarded her with suspicion and fear. Vicki slid into her seat in history class just as the bell rang. Mr. Collins began his lecture on the Civil War, a topic they had been covering for the past week.

Vicki tried to focus, but felt her eyelids growing heavy. Between swim practice, soccer, and the dreams that plagued her sleep, she could hardly keep her eyes open.

Just as Vicki was about to drift off, the classroom door banged open. Principal Morris strode in, his face grim. "Attention students," he announced. "We need to activate the lockdown procedure immediately. This is not a drill." A collective gasp arose from the students. Lockdown drills were common, but when the principal specified it was not a drill, that meant there was real danger.

Mr. Collins hurried to shut off the lights and lock the classroom door. "Everyone move away from the windows and sit quietly on the floor," he instructed. "Do not make a sound." Vicki's heart pounded as she joined her classmates sitting cross-legged on the floor. What was happening? Was there an intruder? A rabid animal loose in the school? She strained her ears but heard nothing besides her own breathing.

After ten agonizing minutes, a crackle came over the intercom. "The threat has been contained. Lockdown is now lifted. Students may return to regular activities." Mr. Collins let out a huge sigh of relief as he turned the lights back on. "Looks like it's over, whatever it was. Let's get back to the Battle of Gettysburg, shall we?"

But Vicki felt no relief. She knew in her bones that this was only the beginning. Something sinister was awakening, and she could not shake the dreadful feeling that she was connected to it in ways she could not yet understand. The trouble was far from over.

Vicki tried to refocus on Mr. Collins' lecture, but her mind kept wandering back to the lockdown. What could have caused it? She glanced around at her classmates, who seemed to have already moved past the incident and were busily taking notes. Only Jeremy caught her eye from across the room, his forehead creased in concern.

The shrill ring of the bell made Vicki jump. As she gathered her books, Jeremy appeared by her side. "Are you okay, witch?" he asked. "You seem really freaked out weirdo?"

Vicki grimaced. "I don't know why I'm so on edge. I just have this really uneasy feeling, like something bad is going to happen."

Jeremy frowned. "Hopefully to you! I still am mad at you for calling me out in front of the whole class for lying. You made me look bad! Lockdowns always make me nervous too. But it's over now. Get over it freak!" He punched her soundly in the arm, making it sting and ache. She had to restrain herself from knocking him out, the jerk!

Vicki managed a small, closed lipped, teeth grinding smile. But as they entered the crowded hallway, the hairs on the back of her neck suddenly stood up.

Down the corridor, she spotted three men dressed all in black suits staring right at her and Jeremy. Before Vicki could react, the men grabbed Jeremy and tried to force him down the hall.

"Let go of him!" Vicki shouted forgetting that she didn't like him anyway, running after them. But as she reached out to pull one of the men away, another grabbed her from behind. Vicki struggled against the iron grip, watching helplessly as the two other men dragged Jeremy around the corner.

Suddenly, a blast of energy pulsed down the hallway, knocking Vicki's attacker off his feet. The men holding Jeremy collapsed as papers swirled mysteriously around them. All the students ran away in fear in the midst of the flying papers. The men scrambled up and fled just as a teacher came running from his classroom.

"What on earth??" Mrs. Margret exclaimed, taking in the scattered papers and Vicki's shocked expression. "Are you alright? What happened?"

"T-these men tried to take Jeremy," Vicki stammered. "And then something...something strange happened. I felt this force."

Vicki took deep breaths, trying to stop shaking. She didn't understand what had occurred with those papers. It was as if some invisible power had scared off Jeremy's kidnappers. Vicki shuddered. One thing was clear – the danger was growing, along with her own mysterious connection to it.

Vicky knew she couldn't stay in town any longer, she had to leave. She rode her bike home as fast as she could, and ran in and opened the door and gathered her things into a bag.

Then police showed up at her house and tried to capture her, but when they were closing in, pistols drawn, she somehow managed to distract them by using an unknown power, she didn't even know she had, to levitate toy bears, and grab some keys to escape through a locked door.

Vicki ran through the woods, hiding as she went, stepping through the wooded glens until she was forced out of the forest trees by soldiers into a small field by pursuing her through the

darkness shining flashlights. In the field was a military truck that blocked her path, and then she was surrounded by soldiers with machine guns who aimed them right at her.

Vicky cowered and crouched, terrified. But as the soldiers closed in, a transparent shimmering dome of force erupted around her, knocking all the soldiers down. Stunned, Vicky watched as the soldiers struggled to their feet.

Now was her moment to escape! Turning, she sprinted deeper into the woods. Dazed and confused the soldiers didn't follow until it was too late and she was gone.

Aunt May found Vicki hiding in her corn fields – cold and alone – in the rain, half starved, shivering from the cold, Scared to death. May had mercy on her –she reminded her of her own daughter, before she had passed away.

May never asked for the full story about what had happened to Vicki and her past, she just knew it was terrible.

You see, Aunt May was lonely. Her daughter had died of covid-19 a year before, and it had broken her heart and left an empty spot. She felt Vicki had come to fill that spot, making life bearable again.

Vicki was a hard worker and loved animals. She loved all animal life, but she especially loved horses, and sheep.

Vicki awoke before dawn to the rooster's crow. Pulling on her boots, she headed outside into the crisp morning air. The stars still glimmered overhead as she made her way to the barn to start her chores.

She began milking the goats, the rhythm of the milk streaming into the metal bucket soothing her worried mind. Here on Aunt May's farm, the outside world seemed far away.

After feeding the animals their breakfast, Vicki went to exercise the horses, leading them in circles around the paddock. She relished the power of their muscles rippling under her guidance. If only she could learn to master the powers within herself.

The day passed quickly with farm work – mucking stalls, collecting eggs, tending the vegetable garden. Vicki cherished these simple tasks that kept her grounded. No mysterious forces here – just the honest sweat of labor.

Then came martial arts training.

Aunt May hadn't always run a farm. When she was young, she traveled the world and learned many languages and about different cultures, and places. She traveled to many places in the world in her late teens and 20's.

Aunt May was an expert in aikido, and she taught Vicki how to use her opponent's force against them, redirecting their energy rather than confronting it directly. They danced across the yard, wooden swords slicing through the dusk air.

Vicki's favorite part was target practice. Pulling back the string of a short crossbow that Aunt May helped Vicki make.

The crossbow fired multiple bolts, one at a time, and ratcheted up the next bolt using a spring-loaded magazine they designed. Then she could fire bolts one after another, even in quick succession. Vicki preferred to use powerful hollow metal bolts.

Vicki would let the piercing arrows fly, picturing her worries scattering like the straw target downrange. Her aim was improving daily.

The days on the farm kept her steady. Here she found purpose in the simple acts of caring for life. As she tended the land and animals, Vicki felt her inner turmoil easing. Whatever storm was brewing beyond this haven, she was gaining strength to face it. For now, she had found a kind of peace.

During the whole time there she never used her powers. She almost thought her powers had gone. But then the dreams came.

The night was cold, and the wind was merciless. It cut through Vicki like a knife.

The lightning flashed angrily upon the hilltop, and the shadow of the old ancient mansion loomed in the darkness, its empty windows lurking blankly.

Then there were whispers. At first, they were hardly a wisp, to be mistaken for a whistle in the wind, but they slowly built in volume, to a rustle, then a scratch, finally a rattle, then a screech, and a howl.

Vicki needed to escape! She ran for the house at top speed. Rain poured from the sky and doused her, and misty clouds erupted from the ground and threatened to engulf her. But she, with her running skills refined at track and field practice, was to the house at breakneck speed, just as the fog encompassed the landscape completely.

Now the screeching was replaced by laughing. Vicki moved to open the door, but it was locked and heavy.

But Vicki was strong from her daily workouts. She backed up, took a running start, and flung herself at the door, full force, aiming her foot at the weakest part by the lock, splitting the wood. The door swung open.

The room was dark and cold. Something made noise behind her. She scanned the darkness feverishly but there was no one.

There was, however, a large cross on the wall, and a figure of Jesus that hung on it.

Then she heard something moving in the darkness outside in the fog.

Vicki found herself backing up toward the wall by a large stone fireplace, putting her back against it. Then the creature attacked her wildly from the darkness, down through the long-cold chimney as she backed toward the fireplace for safety.

Then Vicki woke up.

She jolted upright in her bed, heart pounding. Moonlight filtered through the curtains of her bedroom on Aunt May's farm. It took a moment for Vicki to get her bearings as she slowly realized it had just been a terrifyingly vivid nightmare.

Or had it? Vicki shuddered despite the warm air. The dreams were getting worse. What did they mean?

Vicki tossed and turned, drifting into another uneasy sleep. The nightmares came again, only this time more vivid than ever. She stood paralyzed as thick fog swirled around her. From its depths, a dark figure emerged, black horns curling from his head. The devil! Vicki tried to scream but no sound came out. She struggled to run but she was paralyzed with fear – it froze her stiff like she was being shocked electrically.

The devil strode toward her, his eyes glowing red, his mouth twisting into a sinister grin. Vicki trembled, waves of fear flowing through her body like electricity.

Vicki awoke, as her eyes flicked open, but she still couldn't move, and the fear ran through her like lightning still, even though she was awake. She lay in bed, coated in cold sweat, her heart hammering against her ribs. Slowly the paralysis eased, and Vicki wrenched herself upright, hugging her knees as she caught her breath.

Dawn's first light filtered through the curtains. Vicki rose on shaky legs to dress and head outside into the crisp morning air. As she did her chores, her thoughts kept returning to the nightmares. What did they mean? Why had they gotten more intense?

She realized with chilling certainty that she could not keep hiding here on Aunt May's farm, as comforting as it was. The dreams were a calling – her powers were connected to them somehow.

Vicki had to leave the safety of the farm. She had to face the darkness that was pursuing her, even if that meant confronting the devil himself. She didn't fully understand her gifts yet, but they had saved her before. To have any hope of understanding her role in the impending trouble, she knew she must venture back out into the world... forward to the future that was calling her.

Vicki traveled into the woods, following a feeling, that somehow drew her, to a small village. As Vicki walked between the shadowy trees, she felt an unseen force guiding her steps. After some time, she emerged from the forest into a clearing housing a tiny, fog-shrouded town. A short stout sign said "Ravenswood."

Vicki wandered the empty streets lined with old, creeping houses. Tendrils of mist envelop the town like ghostly fingers. In the distance, Vicki spotted a spire of a chapel next to an ancient graveyard. Compelled somehow by a crystal-clear feeling that it was right, she headed toward it.

The iron gate groaned as Vicki entered the neglected burial ground. Rows of weathered tombstones stretched before her. Faint whispers seem to emanate from all around, muttering indistinctly.

As Vicki moved deeper among the graves, the whispers intensified. She strained to understand the susurrant voices – what secret are they trying to convey?

Vicki rounded a large carved monument and stopped short. There stood a girl about Vicki's age in front of a fresh grave. Her face was wan, haunted eyes ringed with shadows.

"Hello, I'm Sara Davis. I've been waiting for you. I knew you would come – the spirits said so! How did they know?" She exclaimed.

Vicki paused, surprised. "What are you talking about? No one knows I'm here."

"Let me explain," said Sara urgently. "My family's ancestral home is being haunted by violent spirits. They drove everyone out years ago. But that mansion is my only inheritance and I need to reclaim it."

Sara was about a year younger than Vicki – she could have been her twin sister practically, but she was a little bit shorter, and her hair was a lighter shade of blond and long, closer to the same color her hair was, before she died it jet-black to disguise herself in case anyone came looking for her.

Vicki looked at her crossway and gave her a quizzical look. Was this woman for real? She had powers, but there must be a scientific explanation for what happened to her, wasn't there? But ghosts?

“Let me introduce you to my priest friend, he can verify my story, I am not crazy!” Sara said defensively.

Sara led Vicki to the small church by the graveyard near the haunted estate. An elderly priest named Father Pray greeted them somberly.

"It's true," said Father Pray. "I've witnessed it myself – heard voices, seen apparitions appear from thin air. No one has been able to live there for decades."

"But I have to get the mansion back!" cried Sara. "It meant everything to my father and grandfather. It's all I have left of them now."

Father Pray shook his head. "Claiming that estate is like signing your own death warrant, my child."

"No!" insisted Sara, turning to Vicki with desperate hope in her eyes. "The spirits told me the one I await has arrived. You must be the one! You have the power to help me reclaim my birthright from those vengeful ghosts!"

Vicki stared at Sara speechlessly. How could these strangers know about her psychic gifts? What answers might dwell inside the haunted halls they claimed only she could face?

Father Pray said “If you are going to go, I can't be responsible. The devil is at the bottom of this, I know it, and I don't want any part of it. If you're going to go, you'll have to go alone.”

Vicki regretted his decision. It might have been nice to have a man of God with them, but she couldn't force him. She was sorry to see him leave.

"Well, if we're heading to face fearsome spirits tomorrow, we should at least have an amazing feast to keep our strength up tonight!" said Sara with determined cheer.

She led Vicki down a side street to a small cozy cottage that she herself called home. Inside, Sara laid the table with mouthwatering dishes that made Vicki realize just how hungry she was.

A crisp green salad featured garden-fresh lettuces, shredded carrots, plump sweet tomatoes, and crunchy spiced nuts. Nibbling a juicy cherry tomato, Vicki was struck by just how hungry she'd become from her journey into this strange village.

Beside the salad sat golden brown garlic bread, still steaming from the oven, its buttery top flecked with hints of green oregano. Engulfed by the cozy aroma, Vicki felt herself begin to relax.

The centerpiece was a hearty vegetable casserole, colorful peppers and slices of orange squash peeking out between melted cheese and a crisp baked crust. Sara dished the comforting dish onto

Vicki's plate. Famished, Vicki took an eager bite and was amazed at the rich medley of flavors on her tongue.

"This is incredible!" Vicki said after swallowing a second delicious bite. "I had no idea ghost-plagued villages had such talented chefs."

Sara smiled shyly. "Cooking relaxes me. Helps keep the shadows in this town at bay." She passed a dish of chocolate cake so fudgy Vicki could almost sense its decadent texture without even touching her fork to it.

As Vicki feasted happily, ghosts and spirits felt far away. But as the night deepened, she knew that Sara was leading her to finally confront the mysterious forces that had pulled her to this place. And soon she would reveal her true power lying in wait beneath the surface, or die trying.

Bang, bang, bang came a sudden pounding at the door.

"Open up, they're coming!" yelled a stranger's voice.

Sara cautiously cracked open the door to see a wild-eyed man. "Who's coming?" she asked warily.

"Men in black suits – government agents!" he cried. "They're searching for a young woman, sounds like your friend there. You've got to get away quickly!"

Vicki and Sara exchanged an urgent look.

"We'll head to the mansion," declared Vicki. "It'll be dark and dangerous there, but maybe we can hide from them amongst the spirits!"

"Are you crazy?" said Sara. "The ghosts are even more violent at night in that accursed house!"

"Exactly," said Vicki. "Those agents won't dare follow us there until daylight, which gives us a head start."

Sara hesitated, then nodded. She turned to give the stranger instructions. "Try to send those men the wrong way, but don't risk your life for us. Just tell them where we went once it's safe."

The two girls lit a lantern off the cottage wall. Sara grabbed a backpack and stuffed it with bread, cheese, and flashlights. Then they slipped out the back door into the night.

The winding path to the mansion was chill and eerie. Vicki was relieved to have Sara's lantern casting a warm circle around them. She could only hope the ghosts would be more

welcoming...and that come dawn, the answers Vicki sought would finally be revealed from their spectral whispers.

Huddled close, Vicki and Sara made their way up the overgrown path to the looming mansion. Its pointed turrets sliced angrily into the brooding sky, broken stained glass windows glaring like hollow eyes.

Stepping inside, they raised the lantern and gazed around the cobwebbed interior. Massive portraits and tapestries curling at the edges loom along the walls. In their faded images, medieval warriors brandish swords against snarling chimeras and horned devils. Vicki's eyes lingered on a larger-than-life painting of Jesus, his gilded hands raised beseechingly under panes of fragmented glass.

Their footsteps echoed as they navigate corridors piled with dust-laden furniture. The deeper they went, the heavier the atmosphere felt- as if the very walls were watching, resentful of the light the girls carried.

Then suddenly their lantern sputtered out, casting them into suffocating blackness. Somewhere a door slammed, followed by approaching footsteps.

Sara's nails dug into Vicki's arm. "There's something here with us!" she whimpered hoarsely. "This was a mistake..."

Vicki squeezed her friend's trembling hand in reassurance – though her own racing heart echoed Sara's building panic. She reached within, trying desperately to ignite her fledgling psychic powers.

A dry rasp echoed from the shadows. "Vicki!" The voice seemed to come from every direction, echoing off the walls and inside Vicki's mind. To her surprise Sara seemed to hear it too, she wasn't just imagining!

Sara lost control, breaking into jagged sobs. But Vicki steeled herself, peering into the dark void, sensing through the terror that answers await here...once the spirits revealed themselves.

"I'm here," Vicki called firmly into the dark. "Tell me...why have you brought me to this place? What do you want from me"?

"Revenge!" hisses Sara as the lantern reignites with a whoosh, casting her face in devilish shadow. She swung the lantern violently at Vicki, streaking it through the night like a flaming sword.

Caught off guard, Vicki barely dodged the makeshift weapon. The lantern shattered against the wall, glass and flame scattering across ancient carpet. Sara lunged through the flames, her eyes crazed and a guttural scream tearing from her throat.

Vicki realized some malevolent force had seized control of her friend's fragile psyche. "Sara! Snap out of it!" she yelled as Sara clawed at her face. Vicki caught the girl's wrists and pivoted, using Sara's momentum to flip her to the floor. Sara landed hard but sprung back up, the fall having no effect.

"Must make you pay..." muttered Sara, circling Vicki with hands curled into claws. Vicki adopted a defensive stance. Though Vicki had trained together with Aunt May, Vicki never expected their martial skills to meet in life-or-death combat.

Sara attacked relentlessly, screaming words in a language Vicki didn't recognize. Vicki focused on defense, blocking vicious strikes while trying to avoid harming her friend. But Sara fought like a demon, ignoring pain and exhaustion.

At last Vicki saw an opening and delivered a precise nerve strike, hitting Sara at the base of her neck. Sara's eyes rolled back and she collapsed limply to the ground.

Panting hard, Vicki checked Sara's pulse and breathing. Her friend seemed stable for the moment, but this place had warped Sara's spirit. What protection could Vicki find for them before the vengeful ghosts returned for round two? She gazed desperately into the enclosing darkness, knowing the true battle was only beginning...

Mocking laughter suddenly cascaded through the cavernous space. "Fool! How dare you oppose us!" bellowed an ominous voice. "You will regret you ever lived!"

A raging wind whipped through mansion, tearing curtains from their rods. Flames erupted along age-blackened walls. The house appeared to warp and contort, floors rippling. Broken furniture crashed down near them, and lethal debris spun violently through the air as Vicki hunched protectively over Sara.

Then, miraculously, the main door crashed open and flashlight beams sliced the darkness. "Over here!" shouted the men in black suits. Their gunshots and shouts seemed to briefly confuse the vengeful spirits.

Seizing the distraction, Vicki hoisted Sara's limp form and sprinted for the door, the agents covered her retreat. Bursting from the spasming house, Vicki raced toward the wrought iron gates of the nearby cemetery. Maybe on that hallowed ground they'd find respite.

The remaining agents followed on her heels as shrieking spirits gave chase, but the men in black got lost in the fog that rose from the ground, that covered Vicki and Sara's retreat into the old graveyard.

Passing beneath the ominous cemetery arch, Vicki felt a pulse, like passing through an invisible barrier. A soft breeze cleared the fog from the immediate area where they were, then the uncanny wind died abruptly.

In eerie silence, Vicki collapsed onto the wet grass, lowering Sara gently beside a weathered tomb. On a large, aged tombstone, carved deeply in the stone, it said – Victoria Sojourner.

What did it mean? Vicki's heart raced within her. Was this to be her grave? But then she saw the dates on the stone, though they were partially worn off, she could read it was from sometime in the 1800's. No one ever called her Victoria anyway, except her grandma, when she was living. But who was this Victoria, and did it have anything to do with her?

Vicki knew the graveyard, was only a false reprieve from the angry apparitions. The spirits lurked nearby in the mist-cloaked darkness, regrouping, planning fresh vengeance upon the audacious mortal who continued to invade their haunted domain. And Vicki still lacked the answers that drew her to this accursed town – answers only the dead may reveal, when they came for her again on this haunted ground!

Sara stirred awake as Vicki shook her shoulder. She looked around panicking, but when she saw Vicki standing over her she was comforted. Sara exclaimed, "Why is all this happening?"

"You're related to the famous medium Victoria Sojourner who trapped us centuries ago," hisses an eerie voice.

Five ghostly figures emerged from the mist. Vicki took in their archaic clothing and realized each spirit must be from a different historical period.

The first, a bearded frontiersman, wore buckskin leggings and coonskin cap. He carried an antique musket with intricate carvings.

Beside him stood a tall pirate with a crimson bandanna and eye patch, paired with a ragged black coat and scabbard.

A severe-looking woman in Puritan dress emerged next, her hair covered demurely by a white bonnet. But her piercing eyes and prominent mole feel anything but pure.

Next came a Catholic priest garbed in embroidered robes, a glinting cross at his neck. But his smile formed a cold, unsettling mockery of comfort.

Finally, Vicki's gaze fixed upon the soldier. He wore an ornate uniform of red and gold trim, a sword at one side, pistol at the other. His eyes burned with pride and sycophancy as he bowed before Vicki.

"We've waited long for one descended from our captor," says the priest.

"Who, me said Vicki?"

"No, both of you! Say aye to your kin, though a distant one she be?" Squalled the pirate, laughing.

“Your fate and ours are intertwined by blood,” added the pioneer spirit. “Together we may find the freedom we all seek.”

Was it true? Were Sara and her related? And what about this Victoria Sojourner, a medium? Related too? What if her powers run in her family line? Could that explain the force she felt, or the strange goings on at her school? Why were the spirits so interested in her?

Vicki shivered as the ghosts leered closer, moving in on her and laughing as they enclosed her in a circle. But they all stopped short of hurting her, their bodies repelled by the same sort of force that she had used to knock down the men, but brighter.

Her shield may save her from these spirits, and the other spirits temporarily, but for how long? Vicki and Sara seemed to be protected here for now. But night still blanketed the cemetery.

As for these spirits, they seemed strangely familiar. She sensed some regrets in them, however well hidden. And Vicki sensed these complicated spirits would never leave her side...

Michael Lancer long admired medieval knights like noble King Arthur and valiant Lancelot, striving to embody their chivalrous virtues. However, unlike the supremely self-assured legends, Michael tended to doubt himself.

Few suspected his inner turmoil of his vulnerability and lack of confidence however- Michael's exemplary manners and steadiness in crisis concealed fragile self-confidence underneath.

He still vividly recalled nearly drowning as a child, the agony of liquid-filled lungs, his absolute surety of imminent death as consciousness dimmed...Only to improbably awaken on shore, his bishop teaching him about faith while tears of relief streamed down the good man's face.

Despite witnessing many miracles since, lurking self-doubt plagued Michael's thoughts. Had he lived back in Arthurian times, would he cower from quests while bolder knights like Gawain raced to adventure?

Yet when innocents required defense, Michael somehow mustered reservoirs of faith thought depleted. Again and again he plunged into frightening scenarios, risking himself for their protection. His partner Daniel endlessly recounted Michael's daring exploits on these assignments. Acts of selfless courage Daniel dubbed "Paladin Mode."

So, the outward-facing Michael Lancer appeared every inch the gallant archetypal protector, polished and poised in his bespoke suit. While inwardly he remained wracked by the sensation of playing pretend until that next crisis summoned his estranged valiance forth once more. But this time felt different...tonight a girl in strange danger stirred long-slumbering purpose. Protecting the vulnerable was his sacred quest, what he devoted his life toward...

Michael watched the beautiful young woman in the graveyard conversing with...someone invisible. He couldn't tear his gaze from her. Had they met? No prior memory surfaced, yet resonances suggested a faded dream, the sketch of a friendship once known.

Vicki had matured from her youth, her formerly blond hair now raven black, though still wavy and full. She was slender yet strong from farm work and martial arts training with Aunt May. Her determined eyes alternately flashed green or hazel in the moonlight. Now they betrayed exhaustion and careworn sadness belying her age.

When tears threatened, she brusquely brushed them away. Still, an aura of vulnerability surrounded her, triggering in Michael an almost paternal protectiveness. Strange, as she seemed near his own age. Her friend Sara resembled Vicki, though her cascade of golden hair shone brighter.

Unexpectedly, sinister agents invaded the cemetery, Michael reacted on pure instinct, dashing from concealment with quicksilver sword slashing. Clearing a path, he grabbed Sara with one hand, Vicki with the other, sprinting for his hidden motorcycle. Heart clamoring, he felt Vicki clinging to him as the engine roared to life.

Zigzagging along the twisting forest road, Michael struggled to outrun the agents' SUVs. Darting glances showed Vicki gripping Sara tight, the girl's blond hair blowing wildly over his shoulder. But no fear shadowed Vicki's timeless eyes now...only implicit, unconditional trust in her rescuer. Michael had never felt more complete in himself...or more desperate to protect his rediscovered purpose now clasped so close behind him.

Michael kept their pace reckless, trading safety for precious distance gained on straightaways. At last the woods thinned ahead. Bursting from the trees onto an open highway, he banked left so hard that showers of sparks trailed behind.

In his mirror the final SUV braked, abruptly at the forest edge. Had the pursuit ended? The agents made no appearance on the unobstructed road. Michael eased off the accelerator as Vicki and Sara share disbelieving chuckles.

Safely at a nondescript motel, Vicki, Sara and Michael cached their breath as they awaited Michael's partner. A phone call confirmed "Elder Superhero" Pratt would arrive by dawn.

In the flickering light of old bulbs, Vicki reluctantly revealed what transpired at the cemetery after Michael left covert surveillance. Of whispering spirits emerging from the fog – lost souls connected to her bloodline. How they claimed Vicki's fate was forever bound to theirs in a quest for elusive freedom.

Michael and Sara listened, rapt and dismayed. When Vicki finished, a brooding silence settled between them.

At last Michael spoke up. "We all need rest tonight. But I say we leave the spirits contained for now. No good can come of another reckless confrontation."

Sara readily agrees, her face still haunted from possession at the mansion. Pratt's impending arrival lightened the mood somewhat. But in Vicki's mind, the ghosts' dire words echoed:

"You can't escape them! Eventually the others will break free and will come after you and everyone you love!"

What about these strange spirit companions that seem to be tied to her somehow, always there close around her? What and who were they? Were they friends or foes?

Vicki had to step away into the darkness for a moment outside alone when out of nowhere, indistinct forms hovered beside her. One-by-one each appeared to step forward, coming into focus, introducing themselves.

First a frontiersman inspected his bullet casings by lantern light. "Name's Zeke. I'm a scout they called Ezekiel Trailblazer once." His eyes narrowed. "But I guess I strayed from the righteous path, as they say?" He laughed crazy and wild.

Next an officer with a polished sword and sheath embossed with a Spanish insignia appeared and flew to the front before her. "Lieutenant Espinoza, but you can call me Rafael, if you are brave." he announced briskly. "My battalion served with highest honors." His proud chin dipped momentarily. "If prematurely waylaid." he said, but there was something behind his eyes, was it guilt?

A third figure arrived, perused by nautical charts and logs piled atop a weathered sea trunk. Flicking a captain's bicorn hat back, he revealed a ragged eye patch. "Captain Rhodes. Blackheart to scurvy knaves like you!" His good eye glittered before shadows crossed his face. "But I was marooned by fate's cruel whims. Never mind! I got even! You may find it the same fate by me if I ever escape thee!"

Next in line in a corner, a priest with skeletal frame lurked silent in embroidery-threaded vestments, toying with an ornate cross. Only his predatory eyes moved, following Vicki's every breath. He sat at a desk floating in the air with a plaque in Greek she thought, displayed across the front. It said – "Father Damien Grimsley". The specter drummed his other hand's fingers that weren't fiddling with his cross on his desk, smiled sinisterly, then looked away sharply.

The last spirit, a woman in Puritan bonnet and apron circumnavigated the room, peering behind dusty relics. "Bethany Coldfield," she offered briskly, cold blue eyes scanning Vicki up and down. "Once I was a respected soothsayer." She smoothed her skirts with veiny hands. "Till jealous frailties conspired against gifted vision. Even had a whole town in my grasp, now I feel

powerless to escape. I fear even if you die, we will only return to that prison of a rotting castle, and the darkness and hopelessness that engulfs it, for the evil spirits within.”

All the evil spirits danced and flew around her, screaming and laughing as she dodged their distorted figures. She ran back into the hotel where they were staying and slammed the door after her to escape, to be alone, but they wouldn't let her!

As first light seeped through moth-eaten curtains, the specters retreated from Vicki's uneasy awakening. But tendrils of fog suggested haunting dreams were only the beginning...

Despite her exhaustion, Vicki had tossed and turned all night on the lumpy mattress. She had hoped to outrun these supernatural forces. But now dread curdled her stomach at the thought of vindictive spirits breaking free from the haunted mansion, finally, and pursuing Aunt May or her newfound friends.

As the eastern horizon glowed red, Vicki made a lonely decision. She must split from the others for their own safety. The spirits' wrath was destined solely for her. Once reunited, Michael and Pratt will surely keep Sara from further harm.

Vicki scrawled a quick farewell note, blinking back tears. In the quiet morning she mounted Michael's motorcycle alone. As the engine growled awake, she gazed back just once... then drove onward, to face her uncertain future.

The End

Coming soon – the next short story:

Risen:

–Sticks and Stones–