

Prologue

Warm fluid spread beneath the child, waking him. His heart pounded. Cold sweat mingled with the urine soaking the sheet. Panic made his breath come in short, sharp spurts. Tears welled in his eyes. He tried to calm himself, to no avail. He must think. He reasoned with himself. She had warned him, if he wet the bed again she would whip him with the cord from the sewing machine. His back still hurt from the last beating. She said she would whip him worse than before.

He knew she meant it. He had suffered her wrath before. Last night after his bath, he stood before the mirror and looked over his shoulder at his back. The red marks were fading, leaving long, jagged scars. He turned away, unable to bear the image. He was ugly, his mother told him so. Loneliness and despair clamped down on his soul like a vise.

Last Sunday he had been excited. The church on the corner was having a Sunday school attendance campaign. All the children in the neighborhood were invited. Someone had tossed a flier announcing the drive on the street. He picked it up, looking around to see if anyone was watching. He stuffed the paper inside his shirt and ran behind the garage to read it. He decided to go. He had heard something of God's love. Here at last perhaps he would find it.

His mother would never know. As long as he was out of the house and not bothering her, she didn't care where he went. Time and again she screamed her hatred at him. "You look just like your father. That worthless no-good left me to raise his brat." She emphasized her statement by throwing the nearest item at him. If they were in the kitchen it might be a spoon or a knife. Several times he barely missed being nicked.

At 9 AM Sunday morning, he walked to the church and entered through the side door. Everyone else was coming in the front. He watched the boys and girls stream down the hallway. They stared at him. He huddled against the wall, out of their way. He wasn't sure he would be welcome in this house of God. After all, no one had given him the invitation, he just found it.

He thought of all the birthday parties from which he'd been excluded. At school, he would pretend not to notice others pointing at him. They would whisper and laugh, their unkind remarks hidden behind hands covering their mouths. Maybe this would be different. He followed the children. One room seemed to be filling up with those his age.

A pretty woman in a flowered dress stood behind a small podium. She greeted each child by name. He sat in the back and kept his head down, hoping no one would call him out as an interloper. The other students moved their chairs away from him, crowding up against each other. The teacher, a woman in her late 20s, actually smiled at him once or twice. It made him feel warm inside. His mother never smiled at him.

Afterward he wanted to speak to her, to tell her how happy he was to be in her class and how much he enjoyed the stories she told. He hung around outside until everyone was gone. Thinking she must be alone, he approached the room, stopping short at the door. He heard a different female voice.

"If that ragamuffin child is going to attend this church, my husband and I are leaving. He will attract others of the same ilk. I will not have my son associating with children like that."

The Sunday school teacher voice was muffled. He thought he heard her say the word "Christian," but he couldn't be sure.

"I don't care, I'll not have my Howie in the same class with that dirty little waif."

He knew they were talking about him. He left, never to return. No one pursued him. No one came to his home. Except for a collective sigh of relief, the church on the corner was silent. If this couple pulled out their membership, its finances would suffer. What was the cost of losing one little poor boy compared to the loss of this wealthy family?

Ashamed of his ragged clothes, he tried to close the holes with safety pins. On rainy days, he slipped plastic bags over his shoes. He was aware he was different. The pitying expressions of teachers, the taunts of the children made it only too clear.

At the end of the first day of school, he came home not wanting to return. His mother laughed and called him a coward. Soon after, he began wetting the bed. His mother was livid. She yanked him out of a sound sleep and hurled him to the floor.

"You're six years old, you little creep. If you do this again I'll whip you into next week!" she screamed. "Now get downstairs and wash these sheets." She ripped off the wet bedding and flung it at him. He struggled down the stairs with it, tripping over the trailing fabric and almost falling. He wrestled the soaked sheets into the laundry room. Stuffing them into the washer was another matter. Even with the big bird stool, he had to stand on his tiptoes. He couldn't reach the soap.

Running to the bathroom, he grabbed the liquid hand soap. He was standing on the stool pushing down the pump when the back of her hand connected with the side of his head. He flew off, smacking his head on the wall. Tears filled his eyes. She pulled a bottle of Wisk from the overhead cabinet and squatted in front of him as he lay rubbing his head. Her face was a frightening mask of rage. "Get up there and sleep on the floor and if you wet the rug I'll wrap it around your face." He scurried up the stairs, his heart pounding. He curled up on the floor, shivering in his wet underwear.

The bed stayed dry the next night and the next and the one after that. A week later, he climbed into it feeling confident, but woke up in horror. His mother stood over him, gripping his shoulder. Her fingers dug into his flesh like a cat's claws. The pool of urine underneath him was turning cold. She jerked him off the bed and dropped him on the floor. She wrapped the end of the electrical cord from the sewing machine around her hand. Paralyzed with fear, he lay helpless as she brought it down across his back. He howled and writhed in pain. Five more times she struck him, the cord shredding his flesh.

She stood over him seething as he blubbered on the floor, his back oozing blood. "Clean up this mess and get to bed and you better not get blood on the sheets." Then she was gone, leaving her son weeping in pain and humiliation.

Now, five weeks later, he woke quaking with fear in a wet bed. Jumping up, he tore off the sheets and stuffed them under the bed. Running to the chest of drawers in the hallway, he pulled out some clean ones. He stretched them out as best he could and leaped between them.

He heard his mother coming up the stairs. Her thumping footsteps came toward his room. He turned over, faced the wall and pretended to be asleep. She flung open the door.

"Get up and get to school." She banged the door shut and stomped back down the hall. He breathed a sigh of relief. She would be at work when he got home. He could wash the sheets and she would never know.

That afternoon he ran home, taking the shortcut through old man Bleven's yard. Rounding the house, he stopped in his tracks. Her car was in the driveway. Ever so quietly, he entered through the front door and tiptoed up the stairs. There was thunder in the air. It boomed, shaking the house. He hoped it would drown out his footfall on the squeaky fifth step.

In his room, he dropped to his knees and looked under the bed. His heart nearly stopped. The space was empty. Suddenly a hand closed around his upper arm. There was a ripping sound as she tore his threadbare shirt from his back.

For the next five minutes, he endured the worst beating of his young life. Blood trickled down his back and pooled in the waistband of his pants. He shrieked in agony and terror.

"Didn't think I'd find them, did you? You're worse than worthless," she screamed, pounding away with her arm. "I should have killed you right after I had you! I should have left you on the street in a box. Now you're too big, nobody wants you."

She finished with a lick across his shoulder that reached to his stomach, catching his bellybutton. She flung him aside. "Get out of my sight." She whipped the cord at him as he struggled to his feet, catching him on the leg.

He half ran, half stumbled to the stairs. His legs burned and wobbled under him. Halfway down, he tripped and fell to the bottom. Shaking his head, he picked himself up and charged out of the house, not stopping until he was behind the garage. He lay on the ground in a ball and sobbed. Cold rain splattered against his back. He barely felt it.

No one loved him. No one cared. His own mother wished he was dead. Mercifully, he slept. Two hours later, he awoke in the dark. The rain still fell. It penetrated to his core. He shivered violently. Something had changed. He was no longer the tortured, heartbroken little boy. Inside he felt nothing—no pain, no fear, no love, no longing. Nothing. She could beat his body and the others could laugh and point and despise him, but they would never touch him inside. He would be never tortured again. His heart was unfeeling, uncaring, dead.

Quietly, the demon, the Sluagh entered his soul.