

## Chapter Five: Mrs. Miller

Waiting until a human size portal formed, full of shimmering light, I slipped easier into the feeling of travelling through time. The deafening noise was in sharp contrast to smooth gliding sensation. The wind didn't whip against my flesh as I recalled my first jump when I thought it might shred off of my face in sheets. What a difference it made to wait for an opening in time than to be shoved, head first through its tiniest crack. Adding to my ease was the fact that I had come to expect the uniqueness of the trip; with its sudden jerks to the left and gentle tugs at my feet as I skimmed dips in the third dimensional road. There was less to worry about. I trusted that I would land, that I would be alive; for at least the moments leading up to the demon possessed Mrs. Miller. I tried to use the few, brief seconds to come up with a plan.

Mrs. Miller had become two different people in my mind. There was the elderly woman who brought over chicken soup when one of us had the flu. She was the living, in color Mrs. Miller whom I had come to know and love when I too was alive. Then there was the powerful, hideous Mrs. Miller; corpse white and conniving whom I had met in the tunnels. My stomach turned when I recalled the smell of her peeling, rotting flesh. What could I, in one swift moment, possibly say or do to inspire the living Mrs. Miller to fight for her soul and encourage the demon inside her to leave simultaneously? It seemed to me like I was attempting fusion with nothing but a container of old books, a vampire and a Catholic school knowledge of Latin. 'Great', I thought to myself, 'if the exorcism requires a few bars of "Kyrie eleison" we'll be all set'.

A sensation of feeling heavier and heavier spread from my head down to my knees. By the time my feet reached the solid floor of the hospital room, I felt weak and slow. Michael had explained this phenomenon but the actual living it was suddenly a stark reality. I saw Steven already standing near the bedside. The demon possession of Mrs. Miller was in full swing. Her head shook from side to side and foam flowed out of the corner of her mouth. It dripped down the side of her face making a dark blue spot on her hospital gown. Where her blues eyes had once sparkled there were blood red orbs without pupils. She growled and hissed at Steven in defense. He held his ground nervously.

"It's about bloody time you got here! Hurry! The staff is on shift change and she isn't hooked up to the monitors. She's been moved up to Hospice status which means we have even less time than I thought. Manifest and separate the two!" he directed.

Right. He said it like there was nothing to it; like I had performed this "surgery" a thousand times before." My own self composed of mere dark matter was smoky at best among the world of the living. I had no idea how to manifest into something tangible but instinct lead me to the small television near the corner of the room. The speakers crackled and the screen turned to snow as I touched it with both of my hands. I tried to imagine its electricity pouring into my hands and running through my veins. The more I focused the stronger and lighter I felt. I remembered the shadow like ghosts of my own farmhouse of my childhood. Our family had lived in harmony with the midnight dwellers back then. The

ghostly ability to float made sense to me at that moment. I consumed enough energy to achieve buoyancy while my movements were still clumsy and awkward.

“Good enough! Now get over here!” Steven whispered.

I looked down at my hands. They were a faint grey, matching the rest of my body. Light seemed to pass right through me. I was translucent and yet somehow whole none the less. I slowly made my way to the bed.

The demon took one look at me and again thrashed inside poor Mrs. Miller. Her eyes turned from red to filmy white and her head was thrown back as her body contorted. The familiar guttural growl I’d heard in the tunnels flowed from her chest to her throat. “One more step and I’ll snap her body in two. Her bones are hollow and brittle. You know I could kill her easily. Get out!” the demon whispered low.

I shook my head and gave a smirk to hide my deep desire to run out of the room. “You won’t kill her. You can’t afford to. You’re so weak you need a host to sponge from. She’s your only lifeline and you know it” I countered. While I argued, a tingling ran through the tips of my fingers telling me the bed was also electric. I quietly imagined the current leaving the wiring of the hospital bed and into my left hand. With my right, I held the orb that I’d put in my pocket for safe keeping.

The demon shifted inside Mrs. Miller. Beads of sweat formed across her forehead, dampening her hair. She seemed to whimper quietly sounding like a cross between an old woman and a small child. Slowly, a transformation was beginning.

Mrs. Miller’s face began healing from the sores and peeling skin. Her face became smooth before my eyes. The demon was manipulating its host. Her arms elongated with cracks, her hips slimmed and flattened. Her chest heaved in the process and more whimpering as she gripped at her own breasts. “What the hell is he doing?” I asked shocked at the metamorphosis happening before our eyes.

“He’s shifting. He might be trying to get a better hold of her” guessed Steven. He walked to the opposite side of the bed, blocking the door. When I looked back at Mrs. Miller my heart jumped into my throat.

“It’s not her he’s trying to get a hold of” I replied softly.

“Who the hell is that?!” Steven asked.

The brown, wavy hair, the slender nose, the full lips, the broad shoulders, it was Gabe, my husband or rather the illusion of him. I shut my eyes. *It’s not real. It’s not real. It’s not real!* I chanted to myself. I tried to focus, rather, on how the two people living inside the crumbling body of poor Mrs. Miller might be separated.

The demon manipulated his voice like he had back in the tunnels. He no longer sounded like Mrs. Miller or a monster. He even sounded like man in my dreams when he spoke. "Baby, I miss you" he sobbed. He reached for me with unusual tenderness. "I don't want to live without out anymore. I love you" he whispered. He reached again for my hand and I gave it willingly.

His grip was strong like I remembered. His hands still calloused from days covered in chalk and afternoon and weekends working as a finished carpenter. He brushed back my hair and ran a thumb over the edge of my ear. I scanned his impossible face. He looked real.

Both of his hands were firmly at the small of my back. Steven was saying something but I couldn't hear him clearly. As he drew me in closer, I could feel his breath quicken. His high cheek bones flushed. The heat traveled down to his neck and into the muscles of his upper arms and his chest. I traced his collar bone with my finger tips then continued to inspect the sinew and bone of his shoulders, his arms. He felt real.

Swinging his legs off of the bed, he pulled me into him. He wrapped his arms around my shoulders and pulled my face gently to his. His breath was warm and smelled of something sweet like cinnamon and maple syrup. I closed my eyes, ignoring the growing protests to Steven at the door. His lips gently brushed against mine. They were soft and full like I had remembered. Forgetting all time and place my heart thundered into my ears as my heart raced. I wanted this. I wanted the death, the cold, the wind, I wanted to forget all of it. He pulled me into him again and this time my lips parted. I kissed him fully. My tongue searched for his and found it.

I screamed! With every ounce of passion that had erupted from my past life, I used it to push away from his grip. His eyes grew wide with surprise as I jerked from his arms so violently I landed on the floor. I wiped my lips dry and scurried to my feet; enraged at the overwhelmingly convincing temptation.

"I'm dead" was all I could manage as a counter in a cold, detached voice.

Steven stared at me. He was a mixture of anger and shock. "Note to self, demons transform on the outside but their forked tongues betray their ruse" I informed him through gritted teeth.

Steven burst out laughing and had to check himself with great effort to avoid drawing attention to the room. It was a humiliating few minutes as I periodically checked to see he was still trembling quietly with laughter.

"Think of the kids" the demon added, but his voice was growing more and more high pitched as his form began to change again. Gabe's youthful waves of hair fell out leaving stringy, sweat soaked strands in its place. The old woman's body gasped for air when the mutation finished. Broken and frail was the shell of Mrs. Miller once again. The demon sat up in her body. "I could change you" he cooed, all the while looking at me pleadingly with Mrs. Miller's original blue eyes. "Together, we could go back your life. You could go home. You could hold him in your arms again." My heart was racing. My mind

struggled to forget the color kissed images he painted. “Think of your family” tempted the demon through Mrs. Miller’s gently voice.

“Family” I whispered. Steven flashed me a frightened look again as I bent down to tie my shoe. He was openly afraid I might take the offer. I looked up at him as I crouched down at the end of the bed. “We’d all like to see our family, wouldn’t we, Steven?” As I spoke I quietly slid the orb from my pocket across the floor to the tiny opening between the door and the frame.

“Uh, yes. But our duty to humanity often takes us away from them” stared Steven, wide eyed as he annunciated each word as if we were having an argument. I whispered softly to the orb and tried to remember her. So much time had passed. The memory felt just out of reach. I closed my eyes and described her to little family tucked snugly in the confines of the orb.

She was nearly twelve the summer I’d last seen Sarah Miller eating fresh peas in her grandmother’s vegetable garden. It was warm for May in Michigan and she had rolled her jeans up to her knees, letting her bare feet sink into the cool, dark soil. She carried a small bowl filled with early snow peas across the green grass and onto the red and white checkered table cloth of the picnic table. Mrs. Miller shelled the peas with arthritic hands as she gently scolded her granddaughter for eating them right off of the bush. “Sarah, those aren’t washed yet. Besides, if you keep eating them now, there won’t be enough for dinner!”

Sarah shrugged and sat down to help shell peas she surely would have eaten whole. It didn’t matter to her. She loved her grandmother and that was enough. Cooked or raw, shelled or whole, nothing to ruin the first of a few rare Midwestern perfect days; where the sun shined and the feeling of warmth returned after a long winter. The memory was so vivid, I thought I felt the gentle wind blow across my face. I opened my eyes to find it was the slight opening of the hospital room door. Sarah, the apple of her grandmother’s eyes pushed passed a curious Steven.

He quickly slammed the door as the reaction to Sarah’s arrival was instant. A loud roar turned to a scream; two distinct voices came pouring from Mrs. Miller. The demon fought to control his host but it was obvious that Mrs. Miller had finally decided to fight. The sheets of the bed flew wildly as she kicked and punched in the air. Her head jostled from side to side. She barred her teeth and hissed. Her eyes were white again as the demon took the upper hand in the fight. Mrs. Miller’s body began to levitate above the bed. Steven flashed me a look of panic.

“The shift briefing is nearly over! We can’t leave her like this. Damnit! DO something!” he was yelling now as he ran to the door and held the handle shut in his vice like grip.

I whispered the directions while I pictured the scene in my mind. I was guiding Sarah but was careful for her not to get too close or else the entire ruse would fall apart and lose Mrs. Miller and her soul. Sarah did as instructed and walked closer to the edge of the bed. Her lilting voice was filled with every ounce of loneliness I felt. “Grandma” she whispered. “Grandma, come home with me” she pleaded.

Mrs. Miller's body fell with a crash onto the hospital bed. A deep guttural scream like that of a wolf erupted from her lungs as the old woman gripped at her chest. She dug her yellowed nails into her hospital gown, tearing the fabric. The shreds turned red as she repeated the process, only this time with her own flesh.

The two forces inside Mrs. Miller fought again, this time from opposite angles. /leading up to the moment, the demon had done his best to remain within the teeth and bones of the old woman. In turn, the old woman had done her best to push the evil out. When Sarah arrived on the scene, everything changed. The demon saw strength, youth and with youth simpler manipulation and control. Mrs. Miller was no longer fighting for her own life. She was out to protect her grand-daughter's.

Shaking her head violently, she screamed again, only this time it was the familiar elder voice I remembered. "No" came a long, drawn out command as if she were pushing the demon out of her chest with her last breath of air. Her breasts heaved and her muscles tightened. When breath alone wouldn't rid her of the demon taking refuge in the space around her heart, the old woman tore and her breasts. She seemed willing to tear out her own heart if it meant taking the monster within her down. The demon, realizing his host was weakening herself in the hopes of stealing his own life fought back.

She appeared to convulse as her eyes rolled back into her head and saliva mixed with thick blood ran from her mouth. He was subduing her from within. Her hands, bloody and exhausted fell to her sides. Convulsing started again more violently. If the demon couldn't control her mind, he would certainly scramble it until there was nothing left.

"She's biting her tongue!" I cried; giving up on the last idea I had that might give her grandmother the drive to go home to her family.

"The body is failing!" Steven shouted as he pointed to the sliver of bright light forming near the corner of the room. "They're coming for her!"

In a flash of last hope I gave Sarah one last line in for her performance. The sweet girl turned to the fight where her grandmother's body was quickly losing. "If she won't come home with me, will you?" her doe like eyes blinked innocently into the demon and his vessel.

The room fell silent. It was as if we were standing in a vacuum. All sound, all movement, all senses were useless in the long moment. As if it had expanded and left like a rubber band, it quickly snapped back and jolted Steven and I back into reality with the sound of bone chilling laughter. The demon poured from Mrs. Miller's mouth like mud and black coffee, making her choke and gasp. The demon took his time slithering out of the old woman. Her jar extended down to her chest and her hands gripped trembling at her throat. The demon long and fluid tortured the old woman as she choked and began to drown.

I gripped the bed, drawing as much strength as I could. Steven, still at the door, gripped the handle tighter.

"Times up. Nurses are here!" he announced.

I instructed Sarah, willing her to save what little remaining life Mrs. Miller had left. “I’m hungry! Here! Here!” she opened her mouth and invited the demon to come inside his irresistible host.

Two nurses started pounding on the door and pulling on the door handle. The demon took the moment of distraction to make his escape. He leapt into her mouth and thrust himself violently down her throat. Sarah flew through the air and hit the wall knocking down the painting and sending medical equipment crashing to the floor. The pounding from outside the door became frantic. I panicked, not knowing of my walking and talking paper doll could hold together long enough to contain the clever evil inside its thin fibers. Running to the small orb I’d placed near the frame of the door, I yelled to Sarah, “Abutor!”

Paper Sarah instantly became a flurry of flying pages and heavy bindings as the thick, leather cover engulfed the raging demon from all sides. With a thundering “CRACK!” the book reformed and slammed shut, trapping the demon within. It fell to the floor with a loud thud that made the floor vibrate.

An old man in a plaid shirt, grey and colorless stepped out of the shimmering portal of light. Peering curiously at the quivering book he turned his attention to those of us gathered in the room. He nodded politely to Steven and me as he walked to the bedside of the gasping Mrs. Miller. Following him was a creature, cloaked and masked in black. I instinctually backed away from the towering entity but the old man in the plaid shirt paid it no attention. He was resolved in his short vigil over the dying woman in the bed.

Security was at the door and Steven struggled to hold the door. We both waited helplessly and watched as Mrs. Miller’s gasping, first deep and fraught with a struggle lessened to a wheeze, a reach and finally a small shudder of her chest and shoulders. A grey smoke like thread evolved into a cloud above her body. The familiar features of the woman I had known and called my neighbor took shape in hues. Her hair was a dazzling long white. Her eyes, while a mere pale blue grey were surrounded by deep carved charcoal lines that marked a soul that had fought hard to free itself. This was the essence of Mrs. Miller. That hidden part of her that she had carried all her life in her living, in color life stood vulnerable and fragile before us. In an act befitting every definitive aspect of the term undying love, Henry Miller was there to take his wife’s hand at the moment she was free to join him. The two walked hand in hand into the illuminated portal at the corner of the hospital room. Enrobed in black, the creature who had travelled on the heels of Mr. Miller seemed to confirm the absence of his demon kin and opened his own separate portal.

The sound of rushing wind pulled me from the wedded reunion of the Miller’s. I was painfully aware of my heavy legs and arms as I reached for the trembling book; the confines of my newly acquired prisoner. Steven held the door until the very last second and then joined me in the leap back to the Alexandrian Library. Somewhere along the trip, my body collapsed under the tremendous effort it had taken to manifest and fight. I was only vaguely aware of the reassurances from Steven as he helped me to a small mat somewhere in the circular room. De’Vok rushed the imprisoned demon and his confines of paper, leather and hemp strings to a table where he promised to keep vigil.

In the depth of sleep I found small comfort in the rewinding of the day's events in my mind. A painful thing known as hope was as tiny as a seed and yet I couldn't deny it had been planted. The smoky silhouette of Mrs. Miller hand entwined with that of her long awaited love was the last scene I remembered before the blackness confirmed the first successful victory for the side of good.