



The  
Gordon  
Place

ISAAC THORNE

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ISAAC THORNE



Lost Hollow Books  
Franklin, Tennessee

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# PRAISE FOR ISAAC THORNE

Isaac Thorne has written a collection of short horror stories... with a large canvas and a colorful palette. Different types of horror are explored fully, with a killer style. (review of *Road Kills*)

—JIM UHLS  
screenwriter of *Fight Club*

You'd be hard-pressed to find that much entertainment for a dollar anywhere else. (review of *Diggum*)

—DANGER SLATER  
author of *I Will Rot Without You* and *Impossible James*

I'm convinced Isaac could be the next great horror writer. (review of *Diggum*)

—DAVE KARNER  
horror filmmaker and SCRM Radio contributor

Thorne has a nice writing style that “shows” rather than “tells” and you'll feel and see every bump under granny's wheels... (review of *Decision Paralysis*)

—JOANIE CHEVALIER  
author of *Heads Will Roll* and *Deadly Dating Games*

For the misunderstood kids,  
even the ones  
who have done bad things.

Prejudice is a burden that confuses the past,  
threatens the future, and renders the  
present inaccessible.

—Maya Angelou

In every conceivable manner, the family is  
link to our past, bridge to our future.

—Alex Haley

What is past is prologue.

—William Shakespeare



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The villain of this story is a man who is full of rage and hate. He is a product of a failure in American culture that, until recently, many of us thought was on the decline. It is important for you, the reader, to know that a significant portion of the following story takes place inside this hateful man's head. As a result, parts of this story contain scenes of physical abuse, racial slurs, homophobic rants, and misogynistic opinions. These scenes are intended to demonstrate the extent of this character's hate and ignorance and explain the choices he makes. They are in no way intended to be an endorsement of such behavior or thought patterns.

Hate is no path to a well-lived life.

Love each other.



## CHAPTER ONE

“**N**o wonder they think it’s haunted,” he said to no one in particular. And he was right. It *was* no wonder the local young folks traded chilling tales about agonized screams echoing from behind the dilapidated old structure’s walls in the dark of night. There was nothing about the old place that was not sinister.

The clouded dome on the lone security light that stood at the foot of the driveway hung askew on its hinge, providing no security and moaning creepy, creaking complaints at every cold autumn gust. Graham Gordon regarded the light for a moment, then stretched his left arm into the passenger window of his twenty-year-old Toyota Tacoma pickup and snagged his iPhone from its place on the seat. He dialed the town administrator’s office. Empty or no, the old house was still private property. No light at the road was an open invitation for hoodlums and hobos to use it as a hangout, something Graham could not abide even if he weren’t town constable. It was his place now, after all.

“Patsy,” he said when the harried voice on the other end of the line finally answered the ring, “I’m out at the old house

on Hollow Creek. Can we get the power company out here to fix the security light?”

There was a short pause. Graham could hear the shuffling of papers in the background. “I’m sorry, what did you say?” Patsy’s voice came back to him some distance from the receiver. She had him on speakerphone so she could focus on something else.

Graham sighed. Her work hours for the week were waning fast, and Patsy had obviously already checked out for the weekend. He started over. “It’s Graham Gordon,” he said. “Your duly elected constable? I need you to call the power company and get someone out to Hollow Creek to fix the streetlight. It’s broken.”

The paper shuffling stopped. “Oh. The haunted house.” She sounded closer now, and her last was followed by a click as she swapped the speakerphone feature for the normal hands-on mode.

Graham rolled his eyes. “It’s not haunted. I own it.”

“Doesn’t mean it’s not haunted, dear,” Patsy replied musically. “It’s almost Halloween, after all. I know where you are. I’ll take care of it. Oh, speaking of which, I need to tell you about who I’m meeting tonight. I meant to ask you before you left today if it’s ok for Channel—”

“Gotta go.”

Graham tapped the End button, cutting her off. He tossed his iPhone through the passenger window of his pickup and onto the seat, glad to be rid of the encounter and especially delighted to be rid of the device. He caught sight of himself in the passenger-side mirror as he stepped away from the pickup. The man who looked back at him from

his own hazel eyes was rounder than he usually thought of himself, with sandy hair that contained a hint of red. He looked tired. More tired than normal. There was a puffy dark circle under each eye. The scar his dad had made under the right one stood out against his flesh. Graham fingered it, watched it turn white under the pressure, and then released it. It filled and restored itself rapidly with the weight of his index finger gone.

Before the election, Graham had thought those circles were side-effects of spending too many work hours staring at computer screens while troubleshooting technical problems at the Media Place Smarty Desk way over in Hollow River. He fixed other people's computer problems for a living before he became constable. Now he'd made himself responsible for their real-life problems too. Mostly that terrified him. But in at least one way—the way that he and his counsellor had tried to convince him was the best way to frame it—he was fine with it. Being constable was at least different, maybe even a fresh start. He hated having the weight of the modern world's technology in his life as much as having that iPhone in his pocket. Returning to his roots on Hollow Creek Road in Lost Hollow felt like a reprieve from modernity. It was a psychological return to a time before cell phones and social media and twenty-four-seven cable news.

A small part of him regretted hanging up on Patsy, the town administrator and very nearly the only other Lost Hollow town employee, but it had sounded like she was about to try to dump a new to-do on him late on this Friday afternoon. It created anxiety in him the same way that,

without fail, a problem customer walking up to the Smarty Desk at closing time on a Friday night created anxiety. Right now Graham wanted to concentrate only on the task ahead of him.

After a beat, he swallowed his regret and allowed himself to drink in the rest of the sight. The driveway was short and rose at a slight angle toward the house. The surface had long been washed away. The earth it had covered was rutted, battered by season upon season of torrential Southern thunderstorms. Graham could see a hint of the path that once upon a time was a hard-compacted trail of reddish-orange Tennessee chert. Peppered here and there along it were footprints and more than a few meandering pawprints, the former from the local teen nightlife and the latter left by the local Lost Hollow wildlife no doubt. A few more years of neglect and the driveway would end up entirely reclaimed by nature. It already bore patches of overgrown clumps of Kentucky fescue that had turned brown and bent over in the wake of autumn's arrival.

The quarter-acre plot of land surrounding the old home had once been a neatly kept Eden, at least in his childhood memories. The grass had been evenly trimmed under a mini-forest of enormous shade trees. Near the back of the lot had stood a swing set from which he'd spent many a summer afternoon pumping his legs until he'd climbed so high in the sky he thought he might just loop the loop. Thirty years on, the yard had become a pale greenish yellow field of grass and armpit-high cattails, many of them drooping or collapsed from the weight of their own overgrown heads. Some of the shade trees still loomed there, but they

looked smaller now, dwarfed by the overgrowth. One of them was split in half by what must have been a lightning strike. The swing set was long gone. He had no idea what had happened to it. Probably stolen and carted off for scrap metal at some point over the years. Graham made a mental note to hire someone to bush-hog the place. He might also make next spring the one in which he bought a lawnmower.

The house itself put the final touches on the creepy vision before him. Straight out of *The Addams Family*, the two-story Victorian Gothic farmhouse towered over the surrounding landscape, its clapboard siding flecked and blotchy from years of unmaintained wear. The front door stood half open under the front porch gable, revealing a darkened interior that might as well have been a hole straight into the vacuum of space. Graham blinked and, for a second, thought he caught sight of a figure peering out at him from beyond the threshold. Then it was gone. *Tired*, he thought. *Just tired. That's all.*

Three of the four evenly spaced rectangular windows that lined the first floor bore spidery cracks and jagged holes, no doubt the work of some kid bored out of his mind by living along this stretch of barren country road. The fourth window had been gutted almost entirely. Only a single vicious looking spike jutted upward from its frame.

The second floor, by contrast, sported three cathedral-shaped windows, two symmetrically positioned on each side of the gable above the front porch and one directly in the center. Ghostly white linen sheers still hung in those windows, even after all these years of empty abandonment. Their tops were stretched across the width of each window.

The center window's drape flowed straight down, shutting out the view. One side of each sheer on the outside windows was tied all the way back at the vertical center of the window frame. The effect that it created was of a pair of jack o'lantern eyes cut to the left over the triangle nose of the gable and the gaping, ragged toothed maw formed by the windows and door on the first floor. Graham thought it was an appropriate look for the place given the season. The sheer in the right window fluttered and settled as he watched, as if something had brushed past it.

Indeed, he thought, the house looked like a screaming kind of place. No less so because it happened to be the abandoned childhood home of one Graham Gordon, the newly elected constable of a sleepy little Southern burg known as Lost Hollow. Graham hitched up the waistband of his town issue beige, braved the stroll through what remained of the old driveway, and placed a hand on the rough wood of the weather-beaten front door. The gable windows had not looked broken. He doubted the wind had moved that sheer. Maybe someone was inside after all.

"Hello?" He shoved the door all the way back against the wall so what remained of the afternoon light forced the inner darkness backward a pace. He jiggled the interior doorknob as he stepped inside. It would not turn. The bolt was lodged inside its housing in the door. There would be no means of locking the rapscallions out of it tonight. "Is anyone here?" His voice bounced off the walls of the empty hallways inside. "Constable!"

There was no answer, save for the scratching sounds of what might have been a family of rats scurrying around the

aging supports in the walls. He stopped to listen. It sounded to him more like the clawing was coming from beneath the hardwood floor. There was also the crunch of broken glass under his boot when he stepped over the threshold. A quick look down revealed the shattered remnants of a Budweiser bottle, its label still valiantly clinging to the shards. More bottles, some whole and some broken, lay scattered about the interior. The golden late afternoon light glinted off them as it beamed through the door behind him, light that once upon a time would have been filtered through the front yard shade trees.

“Stupid kids.”

That same light from the setting sun elongated his shadow across some of the broken glass and down the ancient oak floor of the entry hall. Ages of dust had settled there. There were dozens of impressions of footprints in the whitish blanket created by the fallout. Some of those prints were coated in a second, finer layer of dust. Others, larger ones that appeared to have been made by the thick rubber soles of someone's work boots, looked more recent. Within the tread marks of those prints, the floor was pristine. Graham glanced at his own feet. He braced himself against the hall wall and hoisted his right foot, which he supported around the ankle with his left hand. The newer footprints were perhaps a size larger than his own, but they could have been made by a pair of Wolverines, just like the ones on his own feet.

He slid his Maglite out of the holster at his hip. The weight of it was comforting in his hand. He gripped its shaft in his right fist and switched it on, steadying it at



shoulder height and shining the beam along the path of dusty footprints. Several paces down the hall, the prints veered off in all directions: some toward the kitchen, some toward the formal dining area and the living room, others toward the stairs that led to his old bedroom on the second floor. It was difficult to tell which sets of prints had gone where because whoever had been there had apparently toured the entire house, leaving overlapping trails in the dust as he (*or she?*) crisscrossed the hallway. Curiously, the prints leading from the front door into the entry hall did not overlap with a set of departing ones. It was as if whoever had most recently trespassed on his abandoned childhood estate had never left.

A final trail—one created by the larger pair of Wolverines—petered out in front of a small plank door that was inset into the same wall that formed the back of the stairs to the upper floor. Graham remembered that door well. It used to open onto a second, more rickety set of stairs leading down and ending in a simple old-fashioned cellar. It was a mostly underground cool spot where, in the old days, it might have been convenient to store that autumn's potato harvest or any other vegetable that needed to be guarded against ruin by winter freezes or preserved from early rot by the blistering heat and stifling humidity of late summer.

The cellar also made a damn near perfect place for a ten-year-old boy to lay low while his enraged drunken father paced the house, slapping his biggest leather belt against his tree trunk thighs and threatening at the top of his voice to “beat some sense into that lazy good for nothin’ limp-dick son of mine.” His thundering footsteps boomed up

and down the entry hall. Each thud felt like it ricocheted against the walls of Graham's skull. If Graham were able to remain silent, the old man would eventually become either too drunk or too tired to care where he'd hidden. He'd settle down and go away. And forget.

Most of the time, he'd pass out on the couch, belt loosely gripped in one factory-chafed hand and an empty bottle of Budweiser dangling precariously from the other, long before he ever thought to look for the boy in the black dank of the cellar. On rarer occasions, a cough or a sneeze was enough to tip off the older Gordon to his young son's whereabouts. He'd tear open the door, stomp down those stairs, and drag the much younger version of Lost Hollow's new constable out by his hair, yanking some of it out of his head by the root.

"I told you never to come down here!" he'd roar. "You're gonna wish I never found you, boy!"

Then the belt would come down and lash him.

Across the right side of his face.

Across the left side of his face.

Across his ribs, butt, and thighs.

The *whip-crack* of the leather tore at his skin, sometimes ripping it open in thin slashes around his cheekbones. To this day, he bore that tiny grubworm-shaped scar under his right eye from one of those beatings. Graham again ran the tips of his fingers along its length. It felt larger than it looked these days. That one he got for forgetting to let Butch, his English bulldog, out to pee. The poor old thing had left a huge, sticky puddle just inside the front door, along with fresh scratch marks in the door's finish from where he'd been trying to alert someone of his urgency.

The elder Gordon had stepped in the yellowish ick upon arriving home that evening, a bottle of brew in hand and already drunk out of his mind. Graham had been lucky to not have lost the eye above that scar that night, not to mention his life.

He glanced at the open front door behind him. He couldn't see them from this angle, but the back of the old door probably still bore Butch's claw marks. The poor old fella had not been as lucky as his owner. Graham had found the dog's pummeled corpse laying on the front porch the next day. Butch's tongue protruded from his mouth and lay flat against the wood. Dried blood was caked on top of his head and had run in rivulets from various injuries in his face. It looked as if his skull and the bones of his face had been bashed in with some kind of blunt object. What muzzle the little guy had had was all but missing, revealing a large open cavity young Graham believed was a sinus. It might have been one of his dad's beer bottles that had done the damage. Broken fragments of one lay scattered about the body.

He'd buried the dog in the backyard that afternoon, fashioning a makeshift cross out of two fallen branches from a nearby walnut tree and a spare pair of shoelaces he'd found in his sock drawer. He'd never actually been to church. Sunday mornings were sleep-it-off time in the Gordon household. The cross was more of a warning for others to not disturb the remains than any kind of desperate hope that his friend might know a better existence on the other side of the dark curtain. The dog might still be buried at the back of the lot, alongside the edge where the clearing

ended and the woods began. He would try to remember to look for the marker before he left, although he did not hold out much hope it would still be there.

The old man's attempts to relieve whatever shred of conscience he bore always dominated the next day's first meal (typically it was lunch because the elder Gordon sawed the logs of sobriety until at least 11 a.m. on weekends). No matter which way things had gone the night before, the excuses were as reliably forthcoming as the morning sun. "Your mother's gone, son. Run off with a nigger man." Graham always winced when his father said the *n*-word, even when it was only the memory of his father's voice. It was one of those words the elder Gordon spat at shout volume, even if he said it in the middle of an otherwise toneless sentence. He couldn't help himself. "I can't keep the place up all by myself. I have to count on you. And if I can't count on you, then I have to *make* you do what I tell you to do. I can tell you right now you don't ever want me to have to *make* you."

Thinking back on it, as he often did in the wee hours of an anxious, sleepless night, Graham sometimes wondered if his dear old dad wasn't more insane than alcoholic. No matter how many times he discovered Graham in that cellar, Lee Gordon would never think to look for him there the next time he tied one on. Graham also wondered why his teachers never said anything about the massive bruises and swollen shut eyes he often sported at school. Lee coached him to say that he'd fallen down the stairs, or got hit playing baseball in the backyard, or some other ridiculously unbelievable lie. But it turned out he'd never had to say any of

those things, never had to explain how he'd managed to get the marks on his face. No one ever asked.

Graham shivered. That booming, angry voice of his father Lee, now twenty years in his grave, was still able to cow him, even when it was only inside his own head. He heard it most on the off days, those times when no amount of the prescription Xanax his counsellor prescribed seemed capable of warding off anxiety, the foreboding paranoia that someone, everyone, wanted to hurt him. Everyone tried to bully him for his inadequacy, the sense of low self-esteem that always accompanies a man who has spent too much of his life trying to stay out of the way. He heard it on those long, desperate days when he wondered how he had ever managed to dupe the good people of Lost Hollow into electing him their constable.

He'd launched the whole campaign on a lark, in an unusual moment of supreme overconfidence following a first date with an online match from Hollow River who had turned out to have an over-the-top interest in community politics. Perhaps, then, it hadn't been overconfidence at all, but overcompensation for his *lack* of confidence. Not to mention his simple-minded and overtly masculine desire to impress the pretty girl. He had never intended to actually serve as Lost Hollow's constable, especially after his match had sailed away mid-campaign in search of more exciting waters with a single attorney from her own town who was running for state senate. In his naivete, Graham had deactivated his online dating account when he thought things were serious between him and Katie. She apparently had not. Now here he was, unexpectedly elected and trying

to fake it until he makes it in a law enforcement role he understood only regarding the description he'd read in a Wikipedia article.

*Why did they pick me?*

*YOU WERE THE ONLY ONE WHO WANTED THE JOB, IDIOT*, the voice of Lee Gordon chided in his head.

It was true. No one had run against Graham, ridiculous as it might have looked for someone in a help desk position at a major retail electronics chain to pursue a career in law enforcement. He didn't even own a gun. Didn't even know how to load one, much less aim and fire one. The city was paying for him to take a gun safety and training course, but the classes hadn't started yet. For now, at least, he was an *unarmed* and inexperienced law enforcement officer. How he was to go about enforcing laws without the protection of a piece (did they still call them *pieces*?), he didn't know. He could have simply quit, resigned the position as soon as he'd won it. But that would have made him look even more the wimp. He'd made this bed, albeit with help from Katie, and how he had to lie in it and pray he didn't shit it.

The only net gain for Graham, if it could be considered such, that had come out of the election so far was that he had been able to use the position to convince the town to turn his old homestead over to him for a song and a promise he'd clean up the blight. That had been another lark. In the same town board meeting that had seen him sworn in as constable there had appeared on the agenda a plan to demolish the old place as a means of curbing the juvenile delinquency it seemed to entice. The rumors being spread by the kids in town had reached the board's ears, and they

had come to the same conclusion he had: the place was turning into an attraction for vagrants and ne'er-do-wells. Therefore, tear it down.

When the time came for public input on the matter, he'd suddenly found himself standing—without having previously planned to do so—and arguing that the place had sentimental value for him and that he'd like a shot at restoring it. He might even turn it into some kind of tourist spot, an idea he'd come to by way of town administrator Patsy Blankenship, she whom he'd hung up on moments ago. She had already renovated one old local homestead into a bed and breakfast that hosted the occasional guest or local event. The board had balked at his idea at first, but after he'd promised to either clean up the blight or hand the old Gordon place back to the town for demolition within a year, they'd relented. Now he owned the home: a shelter for rats, snakes, vagrants, and bored teenagers. He had no idea where to begin.

Graham pushed the thoughts away. This was no time to go second-guessing his life choices and cost himself what little nerve he had summoned to search for trespassers. He sidled up the hall. The back of his shirt created a loud scraping sound against the faded and peeling *fleur-de-lis* wallpaper covering the entry hall, a remnant of his mother's New Orleans roots. He left his own narrow trail of Wolverine sole prints in the dust on the floor, carefully avoiding stepping on the ones left by the previous visitor. The physical memories of life in the house came flooding back to him. The sound of his footsteps on the hardwood floor. The sound of his *father's* footsteps. Even the scrape of the

wallpaper against the fabric of his shirt bubbled up memories of him dashing all over the house, running his hands and fingers over the walls as he did, just as any normal wild young boy might do.

The tiny hook and eye latch that had been meant to secure the cellar door was already undone when he got there. Graham didn't know whether his father had initially installed that latch, but he'd always thought it a silly and unnecessary addition. The door to the cellar was no more than three uneven slats of painted pine carelessly supported along their backs by two horizontal two-by-fours. Large gaps between each slat rendered useless any attempt to keep the cooler air of the cellar out of the entry hall by just shutting the door. Besides, it had always managed to swing shut and stay closed on its own—even unlatched—which was one more reason the cellar had made for such an excellent hiding place.

A small wooden cabinet knob was mounted a couple of inches below the hook. Graham grabbed it and pulled. The door swung open easily on its spring hinges and without much complaint about the new tension; surprising after so many years of disuse. The ray from his Maglite spilled into the opening and revealed three splintery and slowly disintegrating steps, approximately one-quarter of the familiar set of plank stairs leading from the mouth of the door before vanishing into the damp darkness below. Graham felt for the light switch just inside the cellar door and flipped it on, but it produced nothing. He'd had service activated so he could begin work on the place. Maybe the power company hadn't gotten around to it yet. That would certainly explain the state of the security light out front.



“Hello?” he shouted into the depths of darkness. “Lost Hollow Constable! Is anyone down there?”

There was no answer.

Graham stepped through the door. He’d covered only one tread before the sound of the creaking staircase started to get to him. There he paused, not allowing the door to swing shut behind him and not liking the soft and spongy feel of the tread on which he stood. It had much more give in it than he remembered from his youth.

From this position, the narrow beam of his Maglite enabled him to see the end of the staircase, but nothing beyond. The final step looked black and almost completely rotted away. The one above it didn’t appear to be in much better shape. If he went forward, he risked breaking those steps, which would make climbing out of the cellar much more difficult. If he didn’t go on, and someone was trapped down here, he might lose his job in disgrace. Worse, a real law enforcement officer, like a county sheriff’s deputy, might end up investigating the “screams” and finding a dead body he’d missed out of fear, in which case he could at the very least be accused of neglecting his duties as an officer of the peace.

Maglite secured in his left hand, Graham pawed at his right hip, immediately taking comfort in the shape of the county issue radio clipped to his belt. He ran his fingers along the top of the device until they closed around the volume knob, which he turned to the right. A thin *click* and a spurt of white noise erupted through the tomb-like silence of the old house. It vanished just as quickly, leaving in its wake the distinct hum of radio silence. Even so, it was reassuring that he had not only remembered to carry his direct

connection to the Hollow County Sheriff's Department inside with him but it also appeared to be in proper working order.

"Let's hear it for technology. Thank God."

From somewhere inside his head, he thought, the darkness replied: *GOD AIN'T GOT NOTHING TO DO WITH IT.*

The next thing he felt was the bone-crunching shock of something blunt and heavy striking the back of his head. He heard what sounded like the shattering of thick glass. He was able to stay upright just long enough to feel what might have been a trickle of blood oozing from his scalp to the nape of his neck. A pair of unseen hands at his back thrust him into the darkness of the cellar, launching him down the full length of the rickety staircase. He fell forward, plummeting face first into the densely compacted earth beneath the house. The bridge of his nose exploded in a bright starburst of pain. His upper teeth crashed down on his lower lip, ripping open the pliable flesh. He felt an immediate swelling there. A thin stream of hot blood ran tear-like down his chin from the wound. Dimly, he heard the *crack* of splintered wood as his shins came down last, disintegrating the deteriorated lower steps in a fireworks show of wood rot and ancient dust.

His radio went flying when he hit. He heard it shatter in a hiss of static somewhere off to his right. The base of his Maglite struck the ground at the same time. It flew from his hand and bounced off the earth once, twice, and rolled some distance over the ground before coming to rest against the farthest cinder block wall of the cellar. The lamp behind the flashlight's lens flickered madly, creating a nauseating

strobe effect, a stop-motion version of Graham's shadow on the wall beside him as he at first struggled to regain his feet and then gave up, collapsing flat to the earth.

The lamp finally steadied itself at a low burn, illuminating almost nothing about the cellar but the corner in which it had landed. It had come to rest too far from the limit of Graham's reach. He stretched his left arm out for it anyway, hopeful that the darkness had merely created some sort of illusion of depth. His fingers clawed at the dirt for a second or two before they ultimately surrendered and lay still.

Graham Gordon lay broken and exhausted on the black earth at the bottom of the cellar stairs. In the fading last rays of his dying Maglite, he saw an eye: a disembodied, full white orb broken by jagged lightning-shaped lines of red capillaries. The iris in the center of the eyeball was a murky dark brown color, unshining and nearly black. Its pupil was but a pinprick in the beam from the flashlight.

It stared at him from just beyond the edge of the darkness, unblinking.

"Dad?"

The world went dark.



## CHAPTER TWO

Joe “Staff” Stafford turned up his nose as the HOLLOW COUNTY sign grew large in the windshield. He rode in the passenger’s side of the ugly white Chevy S-10 pickup Channel 6 had assigned them for the week. A similar white topper with a common locking mechanism had been installed over the bed of the pickup to ensure that all of the station’s heavy, outdated video journalism equipment remained unmolested by any nefarious members of the general public during their stay in this small redneck town. Staff had always found these types of security efforts especially hilarious since there were glass windows on every side of the topper and the Channel 6 logo was emblazoned on the pickup’s hood, both its doors, and its tailgate. He could imagine a would-be thief approaching: “Oh, look! It’s Channel 6’s truck with some expensive, outdated camera equipment! Oh, wait. No. Nevermind. There’s a lock on it.”

Staff’s partner in crime for the weekend (his supervisor for this particular outing, really), reporter Afia Afton sat behind the wheel. Her eyes were on the road, and her long

fingers with glossy black polished nails were curled around ten and two. She didn't see him sneer as they blew by the rusty old sign full of buckshot holes and half-buried in Virginia-creeper, but he hoped she could hear the vexation in his voice.

"This? This is what we drove fifty miles on a Friday afternoon to see? I'm going to fucking kill Joanie."

Afia scoffed. "It's just the county line. We have a few minutes before we hit Lost Hollow proper. I used to live around here, you know. Back then, the town was pretty much all woods and farmland except for the church, the school, and the cemetery. Those who weren't farmers worked at the carbon plant way over in Hollow River. There was a tiny public square in the middle, but it was mostly used for town offices and a couple of small mom and pop places. If you wanted to get gas or mail a package or buy groceries or see a movie you had to drive to Hollow River."

"Where the carbon plant was." He might have sounded bored. He didn't intend it, but he felt it.

"Right. It might still be that way, but I can't imagine that the kids who grew up here wouldn't have made some progress by now. Well, if there *were* any kids who grew up here."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the Lost Hollow I remember was aptly named because it was kind of a lost place. It's where people lived or died or disappeared without anyone noticing much one way or the other. Fuck, I was only eight years old when my mom vanished. Twelve when my dad went. If his murder hadn't been all over the news in Hollow River and the other bigger cities back then, I don't know what

would've happened to me. I got lucky, I guess. Got into the system just when it became fashionable for rich white folks to foster orphaned black kids."

She sighed. Staff shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He hadn't known that about her parents, and he wasn't sure how, or if, he should respond. But at least he wasn't bored anymore.

"Don't get me wrong," Afia continued, "my foster parents were good people, not like the horror stories you hear from a lot of kids who got handed to abusers or straight-up predators in those days. They never adopted me, but they did see me through high school and four years of college. I doubt I'd be here if it weren't for them."

Staff laughed. "You mean back in Lost Hollow?"

"I mean in the news business, asshole." She smirked at him. "But there has to have been some progress here since then. I know it. We're booked at a bed and breakfast right in the middle of it, aren't we? That certainly wasn't here when I was a kid."

"Yeah," Staff said, his voice distant. "A bed and breakfast that just happened to be completely vacant in a supposedly haunted small town in the middle of October. I'm sure. I hope you brought something with some DEET in it. I sure as hell don't want to go home with Lyme Disease."

Afia rolled her eyes.

"It's October, Staff, like you said. The risk of you getting a tick bite out here is about as good as us getting real ghost footage this weekend. I'm not happy about having to come back here, either, but this woman we're meeting has Joanie convinced that there's a story to tell. People love to hear

about ghost shit this time of year. I just hope we can come back with *something* because I never heard so much as a single disembodied ‘boo’ the whole time I lived here.”

Staff grunted. “All I’m saying is that you wouldn’t see ‘Channel 6’s Own Dan Matthews’ running around a dusty old house and leaping at shadows on the nightly news. He reports on real stuff like government shutdowns and disasters and robberies and murders and Republican corruption.”

“Dan sits behind the anchor desk. He doesn’t actually *do* the field work anymore. I’m not even sure he’d remember how. Like I said, I’m not happy about it either, but I try to remember that there will come a day when we won’t be the ones they send to cover the puff entertainment shit. Channel 6 has viewers out here. Probably someone complained that we never cover them, so this piece is supposed to be their fluffy little make-good for the small town on the big city news. There’s not going to be any leaping at shadows if I have anything to say about it, and I do have something to say about it. This is my story now. We’re going to talk to some townsfolk and explore a house or a cemetery so we can tell their tales and give the viewers something to talk about. If the town is lucky, they’ll get a few tourist dollars out of it for Halloween, but we’re not fucking *Ghost Adventures*.”

That settled him a little. Afia was on the same page, then.

“Yeah. We’re not fucking *Ghost Adventures*. I just feel like we should’ve graduated from stuff like this by now. I paid my dues with groundbreaking and artsy-fartsy feature stories and make-good puff pieces when I was a newspaper photographer, for Christ’s sake. You wouldn’t know it to look at the credits, though. *The Review* never gave credit for

in-house photography to anything but STAFF. Everything always said STAFF PHOTO at the lower left, even though I was the only photographer on the payroll. That's why I adopted the nickname. If they're going to credit STAFF for every photo, I might as well be Staff."

Afia laughed. "You've only told me that story a hundred times."

"Yeah. A hundred times. I guess I'm still bent about it. I honestly thought video journalism would be a better gig. What does a guy with a good eye have to do to earn a little respect, anyway? If I didn't know Joanie better, I'd think she had something against gay guys. She's sending us into what I know is going to be a redneck pocket hell of backward racist conservatives."

Afia took her eyes off the road for the first time and looked at him wide-eyed. "You're gay?"

"Yes," Staff replied with a deliberate lisp. "Can't you tell? And you're an African American woman. This is not news to anyone who has been half awake since we were both hired."

Afia examined her own hands, still responsibly wrapped around ten and two on the steering wheel. "I'm black?" she said in mock astonishment. "Oh my. Maybe we'd better forget the DEET and go buy ourselves some camouflage and a gun rack instead."

"Afia—"

"No, seriously, don't judge the place like that before you've seen it. Yeah, a bunch of racists lived here when I was a kid, but it wasn't the loud-mouthed redneck Trump resurgent racist types. At least, I never saw them around town back then. I never met racists in that balls-out throwing shit



at you while you're just trying to go to school way. It was more subtle than that here, more patronizing, I guess. They wouldn't call you names, but they'd assume you couldn't speak as eloquently as the white folks, so you'd get the part with the fewest lines in the school plays. Most of the other kids assumed we were poor, too, even though my dad worked at the same carbon plant in Hollow River that theirs did. I guess they figured a single black father household wouldn't hold onto money the way a lily-white nuclear family would. I don't know. I never asked."

He looked away from her, focusing on the toes of his own sneaker-clad feet. They were crossed at the ankles and propped on the dashboard in front of him. "I'm sorry, Afia. I was just trying to be funny. You mean to tell me that in the whole time you lived in this white-bread small town in the deep South that no one ever once threatened you or called you the n-word? Not once?"

"Tennessee is not the 'deep' South," Afia reprimanded. She thought for a second. "Well, there was this *one* guy." Her upper lip twisted into an angry sneer. "His last name was Gordon, I think. I don't remember his first name. He had a kid my age that used to come to school beat up all the time. We had a lot of problems with him for a while, but I guess I was too young to remember too much about all that. I know he hated my dad's guts, and I know my dad had to call the sheriff about him trespassing at our place more than once. It wasn't long after my mother disappeared that all the trouble started, I think. Dad never told me what it was all about, though. Just said some crazy alcoholic white man thought dad had wronged him somehow."

She shuddered.

“I do remember one night when he woke us up, standing on our front porch with a beer in one hand and a shotgun in the other. Let me tell you, you’ve never heard anything scary until you’re awakened from a dead sleep in a quiet country house by the sound of someone trying to bash in the front door. I don’t think I’ve ever been more scared in my life, not before then and not since. He kept pounding on the front door with the butt of that shotgun, screaming for my dad to come out and face him. My dad called the sheriff on him then, too.

“I was afraid he was either going to break down the door or start shooting up the place before they got there, but he never did. He took off running when the deputy arrived with his strobes flashing. Nobody ran after him, though. I don’t know why. He just ran off into the woods behind our house and disappeared. My dad went down to the station the next day to press charges, thinking they’d go arrest Gordon at his house. The sheriff told him that more than likely it wouldn’t amount to anything in a court of law. His word against my father’s and the judge was as likely to believe Gordon over my father as the other way around. My dad figured it was because we were black. Some part of the white folks believed we probably deserved whatever it was this dude was holding against us.”

Staff grimaced. “Must have been awful.”

“It was. I always wondered whether that man had something to do with my dad’s murder. They found him, my dad, at the base of that bullshit obelisk the Daughters of the Confederacy placed in the middle of the town square

back in the early Sixties. The town administrator showed up to open the office for the day, and there was my dad, propped up against it like a wino passed out in an alley. Only the red stuff running down his shirt wasn't wine. It was blood. Whoever attacked him had sliced him from ear to ear. Some kind of hunting knife, probably. That's what the sheriff's department said, anyway."

There was a hitch in her voice. Staff opened his mouth to tell her that she didn't need to relive this horrible chapter of her life for his sake, but she started up again before the words formed on his lips.

"Not that they were much of a sheriff's department. There were never any suspects, at least not that they publicly named. No apparent motive other than hate. My dad's wallet was still in his pockets. His car was parked in one of the slots in front of the administrator's office, keys in the ignition, and had apparently been wiped clean of fingerprints. The only blood in it was his own.

"The sheriff said he thought the murder had been committed somewhere else, and that the killer had driven my dad's car with him in it to the town administrator's office and placed his body against the obelisk as some kind of racist insult or something."

"They never even questioned this Gordon dude?"

Afia shook her head. "Not that I know of."

"So what happened to him?"

She shrugged. "Dead, probably. He was kind of old even back then. Quite a bit older than my dad, for sure, even though he had a kid my age. He was a heavy drinker, too, from what I heard. I can't imagine he's still kicking around."

“You’ve never looked him up?”

She did not reply. After a beat, Staff let it be.

“So, Joanie knows you’re gay?” Afia asked when another few minutes of uncomfortable silence had passed.

Staff laughed. “Everyone at the station probably knows it. I actually prefer it that way because of the times we’re living in right now. I thought things were getting better under Obama, but now...well, now you have to be much more careful about where you work because the company could see your homosexuality as a public relations liability depending on the demographic they want to serve.”

Afia nodded.

“That’s what it comes down to, anyway,” Staff continued. “You won’t see Nike backing down from a Colin Kaepernick campaign because racist conservatives aren’t their demographic. It’s the same thing with places like Chick-Fil-A. You won’t see them cozying up with outspoken liberal celebrity spokespeople because their base demographic is conservative Christian with a capital K. Corporate America is starting to choose tribes just like the American people have chosen tribes. There’s no middle ground anymore.”

He sighed. “That’s why I told Joanie up front during my interview that I was gay. I don’t think she could legally ask me about it, but that hasn’t stopped other companies from finding reasons to fire someone like me over it. Religious freedom is just the latest excuse to discriminate. Trump had just been sworn in when I was interviewing for this job, so I told Joanie straight up that if my being gay was going to be a problem for them, I didn’t want to even bother with the rest of the interview.”

Afia cocked an eyebrow and cut her eyes at him. “What did she say?”

“Well, obviously, I was hired. I think she went to some of the higher-ups before they agreed to hire me, though. It was like I was a felon or something. She kind of lost her poker face when I brought it up, you know? I don’t think sexual orientation had ever come up in any of her interviews before.”

“It’s a pretty effective ice-breaker. That’s for sure. Here we are, by the way. We just passed Lost Hollow’s city limits. We’ll be in the town square in just a few.”

“So,” Staff said after another short pause. “When did you tell Joanie you were a black woman?”

Before Afia could reply, Staff felt his body lurch forward against the seatbelt, His head thrust forward toward the S-10’s windshield. His feet were still propped on the dashboard, and it now felt like his toes might punch through the glass. He threw his hands in front of himself, bracing against his own knees because his legs were in the way of the glove compartment. Afia, on the other hand, held onto the steering wheel at arm’s length, forcing her back into the bucket seat and locking her elbows in place. She was practically standing on the brake pedal.

The S-10 came to rest one hundred-eighty degrees into the oncoming lane, straddling the double yellow line in the center of the Hollow County stretch of SR-501. Behind it lay two new semicircular skid marks along the ancient gray pavement. Had she been a teenage white boy in Lost Hollow on a Saturday night in the late Eighties, she would have no doubt been congratulated on the least impressive donut of the evening.

Staff, whose shoulders were already feeling stiff following his brace for impact, glared at her with wide eyes, his mouth hanging open. “What. The. Fuck?” he managed.

“I’m sorry,” Afia said, her voice shaky and too loud. “Oh, God, I hope I didn’t hit it. I hope I didn’t hit it.”

She fought with her seatbelt, popped open the driver’s side door, and leaped out of the S-10. Staff watched her circle the vehicle, first examining the front tires, then the rear. She was frowning. Staff rolled down the window.

“Afia? What the fuck?”

“I...I’m not sure.” She circled the S-10 once more and then climbed into the driver’s seat. “Something ran out in front of us. Looked like a dog. Black. I was afraid I was going to hit it. I guess I didn’t.”

“We probably would’ve felt it if you had.”

“Yeah, probably. It darted out from that road back there, just as we passed the city limits sign. It was just this little black coat of fur on four stumpy legs. I guess it was a dog. I’m not sure. Something was weird about its head, though. It didn’t look like any other dog I’ve ever seen.”

“Maybe it was a badger or a groundhog or something.”

“Maybe. Are there black groundhogs that run on dog legs?”

Staff shrugged. “Well, at least we didn’t hit whatever it was. We need to get the truck back into the right lane, though, don’t you think? I’d hate for Channel 6 to have to shell out the big bucks for a new truck and new equipment because we were T-boned by a semi or something.”

“Yeah.” She shifted the S-10 into Reverse and straightened it into the correct lane. To their right lay a stretch

of country lane that a faded green street sign identified as HOLLOW CREEK RD. A few notches below that sign was another, more faded yellow sign that merely read DEAD END. Staff jerked a thumb at them.

“Does every place in this county have the word ‘hollow’ in the name?”

“Probably. It has a creepy quaint ring to it that the locals like. Makes them feel Colonial or some shit, though I can’t imagine the town dates back much further than the early nineteenth century. We can ask when we get to the town square. The administrator is supposed to meet us at the B&B and give us some ideas about the best places to visit. Her name is Patsy. Sounded like a real Southern Belle on the phone. Stretched out her o sounds and skipped the l in some words.”

“Creepy looking little dead-end road, that’s for sure.”

Afia glanced at the sign. “Yeah. Let’s get out of here. If I remember, that’s where that Gordon dude lived when I was a kid. Our house was through the woods behind his place. Our driveway connected to another road a mile or so down.”

“That close?”

“Yeah. I think I’ve had all the memories of those days that I can stand for one day.”

“You don’t want to see your old place, since we’re driving by?”

Afia looked at him, resentment behind her tired eyes. “No.”

She shifted the S-10 into Drive and hit the gas, allowing Lost Hollow’s city limits and the dead-end Hollow Creek Road to diminish in her rearview mirror. From his side of the truck, Staff watched it as well. For a second, just as

they rounded a curve to the right, he thought he might have seen the creature they'd nearly struck, dog or not, poke its head out of the weeds and scrub along the side of SR-501 that lay opposite the Hollow Creek Road dead end. Then it was gone. It had either withdrawn into the scrub or was obscured by distance and the black capital letters at the bottom of the mirror that read OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR.

*I hope not, he thought, as the pickup rounded another curve and obscured the scene entirely from his view. It's just as well with me if objects keep their distance while we're fifty miles away from home.*

A few minutes later, Afia relaxed her grip on the steering wheel a little, stretching her fingers against the warming rays of the autumn sun as it began to set behind a cluster of buildings that loomed large in the windshield as they approached.

“Finally,” she said. “We’re here.”



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## ALSO BY ISAAC THORNE

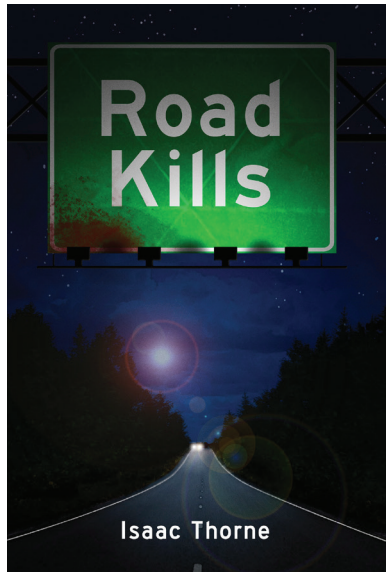
ROAD KILLS is a collection of short tales of dark horror from the mind of Isaac Thorne. These stories are all connected to travel, to the road. It is always lurking there, just waiting for you to come out for a drive or a walk or a jog.

However you next confront it, the road is already there, plotting.

And waiting.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Isaac Thorne is a nice man who has, over the course of his life, developed a modest ability to spin a good yarn. Really. He promises. You can find him on Twitter @isaacrthorne or on Facebook at [facebook.com/isaacrthorne](https://www.facebook.com/isaacrthorne). Just don't push him down a flight of stairs.

In addition to writing horror, Isaac reviews horror movies for [TNHorror.com](http://TNHorror.com) and [TheHorrorcist.com](http://TheHorrorcist.com). He is also the host of audio narration shows *Thorne's Theater of Terror* and *Classic Cuts* on SCRM Radio, which is a 24/7/365 internet radio station available online at [scmradio.com](http://scmradio.com).

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# All he wants is to live his life...

Lost Hollow constable Graham Gordon just walked into his abandoned childhood home for the first time in twenty years. Local teenagers have been spreading rumors about disembodied screams coming from inside. Now, thanks to a rickety set of cellar stairs and the hateful spirit of his dead father, he might never escape.

Meanwhile, Channel 6 News feature reporter Afia Afton—whose father is the victim of a local decades-old hate crime—is meeting with town administrator Patsy Blankenship. Her mission is to develop a ghost story feature for a special to air on the station's Halloween broadcast. When Patsy tells her about the screams at the Gordon place, the past and the present are set on a collision course with potentially catastrophic results.

Can Graham come to terms with his father's past and redeem his own future? Can the murder mystery that has haunted Afia for most of her life finally be solved?

It's a fight for the future and the past when spirit and flesh wage war at the Gordon place.



ISAAC THORNE is a nice man who has, over the course of his life, developed a modest ability to spin a good yarn. Really. He promises. Just don't push him down a flight of stairs.

