

CHAPTER 3

Sarah sat there on the floor in the living room, watching an episode of a science fiction series that was called 'Beyond Reality.' She found the show to be moderately interesting. It involved a couple of university parapsychologists who investigate occult and supernatural phenomena. Sarah liked these spooky shows. In this particular episode, called 'Sins of the Father,' a little girl has dreams implicating her father in a murder. The show always intrigued Sarah; sometimes she wished she could just shift into some alternate reality like the characters in the show did from time to time. Yeah, she really liked that idea for sure!

Maybe she could just disappear one day like Bobby had disappeared. Maybe he would finally send her a letter telling her where he was so she could leave too. This particular episode, however, brought back other thoughts she'd had from time to time since her brother had vanished; these were darker thoughts, 'what-if' kinds of thoughts, that sometimes involved her father, and sometimes even her mother. She didn't like thinking these kinds of thoughts because, if true, they meant that she wasn't safe living in this house. *What if?*

As the closing credits for the show began running across the television screen, Sarah found herself thinking about the time Bobby got caught with a joint in the second floor boy's bathroom at school by the school's custodian. The janitor had marched him unceremoniously straight to the principal's office, where he'd had to sit in the outer office enduring the cold, fish-like, alert scrutiny of Mr. Danielson's secretary. Miss Richards was an old bat, Sarah thought, and not for the first time, with her grey hair all bundled tightly up on top of her head, and her glasses halfway down her nose, kept from falling by a silly looking nylon cord. She had a way of looking at someone that could make a person feel like they were invisible.

It was almost fifteen minutes before Mr. Danielson would see finally him. Bobby had confided to Sarah later that night that he'd been really scared then; not of what Mr. Danielson might do, of course, but of what their father would say or do when he found out what had happened. And to make matters even worse, Mr. Danielson had made Bobby open up his locker and surrender the small baggie of pot he'd brought with him to school that day. It was the last of what he had.

If the principal had wanted to, he could've called the cops and had Bobby arrested. He could also have suspended him. Instead, he'd called Mom and Dad. Mom had come down to the school as soon as she'd gotten the call from Mr. Danielson to pick Bobby up and take him home. It was class change time right then, and Mom had escorted Bobby through the crowds of students milling around the halls on their way to their next classes. It had been so horribly humiliating to be paraded down the hall by his mother like some second-grader, and in front of all those other kids. Bobby said the principal was smiling when Mom came into the office to take him home. After that, she'd done her best to avoid the principal.

And as it turned out, Sarah had correctly guessed, Bobby might've been better off in the hands of the police. Mom and Dad had been furious. Sarah took a long drink from the soda can, hardly tasting it at all, as she recalled her father, red-faced and shaking with anger. Mom had called him at his work before she'd left to pick Bobby up, and he'd actually come home early.

Sarah happened to be home that day, recovering from the flu. She almost wished she'd been at school that afternoon. Sarah knew right away that this was going to be really bad; Dad never left work early. It was like he had something to prove to everyone. He'd stormed through the door, almost slamming it off its hinges behind him. The thunderclap of the door slamming made Sarah, who was in her room, jump in fright.

Sarah recalled opening her door, and coming down the hall toward the living room. Dad was raging, screaming for Bobby to come out of his room before he had to go in after him. From the entrance of the hallway, she saw what was happening. As soon as Bobby was within reach, Dad had grabbed Bobby by the shoulders, and begun shaking him violently.

"You little...! I oughta' beat the hell out of you; that's what you really deserve, you ungrateful wretch! Here your mother and I try to give you a nice home to live in, and good food on the table, but that's not good enough for the great Bobby Wells, is it? No, of course not! You have to do drugs, don't you? I'm not getting paid for the time I had to take off to come home, you little criminal. Did you think about that?"

Sarah saw Bobby flinch back from their father's rage; neither of them had ever seen Dad like this. But Robert Wells Sr. wasn't finished just yet. He'd paused for a breath, and continued shouting with no lowering of the decibel level. "You're taking food off of our table, clothing off your mother's and sister's backs. You ever think about them? What your actions might mean to them?" Her father was backlit by the afternoon sun shining through the front window, and she could see flecks of spittle flying in tiny, silvered drops from her father's lips.

"You have absolutely no gratitude at all, eh? Nothing's more important than what you want, right? Am I right?" As Robert Wells spoke, his voice continued to get louder and louder, his face darkening alarmingly. Sarah had lunged forward, grabbing at his arm, afraid of what the clenched fist might do. Bob Wells shook her off with a violent jerk of his arm, but he finally released his son, shoving him roughly away from him. "Okay you little ungrateful monster, you wanna act like a criminal? Do you? Well, we can treat you that way, you know." He paused, taking a breath, thinking out his next thought. "Yeah, Bobby, we can treat you just like the criminal you're turning out to be."

Sarah had looked at her mother in fright and desperation. Sarah could see that Lydia was pale and scared, but Sarah couldn't miss the anger that was also blazing in her eyes. Lydia finally spoke, her voice low and filled with an icy quality that Sarah found just as disturbing as her father's red-faced ranting. "I hope you didn't bring any of that...that poison into this house, young man."

Bob senior glanced at his wife approvingly. He smiled, nodded, and said, "I've got an idea, Lydia." He returned his attention to his now cowering son. "I think we'll have to search your room, just to make sure you haven't brought any of that stuff in here. What do you say to that? You think that's reasonable under the circumstances? I do, and so, I'm sure, does your mother."

Bobby turned his wild, frightened eyes toward his mother. He said in a low voice, "I don't have any weed in the house, Ma, and that's the truth. Mr. Danielson took all that I had, honest!"

"Honest? You dare to use that word? Dope addicts don't know the meaning of the word 'truth,'" she responded.

Bobby was almost crying now. “I’m not a dope addict, Ma,” he pleaded. “So I smoke a little grass once in a while to relax, so what? You guys drink all the time to get high, I can’t see any difference.”

That was when Bob senior whirled with an inarticulate roar, and slapped his son across the face—hard. The boy staggered back beneath the blow. “You show a little respect for your mother, you rotten...” But he didn’t have time to finish what he was about to say.

Sarah screamed and ran to Bobby. The blow had caught him off-guard and he’d lost his balance, stumbling back against the arm of the sofa. He’d been surprised, but he’d managed to dodge the blow somewhat, and he wasn’t really hurt beyond the red weal growing along the right side of his face.

Robert Wells had then turned his attention to Sarah. He grinned at her, then turned to Lydia and said, “We better search Sarah’s room as well. Who knows? She might be using the stuff too; gotta make sure.”

“That’s not fair, Daddy,” she shouted. “I didn’t do anything.”

Bob smiled grimly. “I guess we’ll find out, won’t we?” And that was the end of the conversation. Robert Wells had closed the subject by shoving past Bobby, and walking in long strides down the hallway to Bobby’s bedroom. He flung open the door, and stalked in.

Mom and Dad had searched both of their rooms that afternoon. And in Sarah’s opinion, they’d not been gentle about it either. Sarah hadn’t even been involved, but her parents wouldn’t take her word for it; they were just assuming because she was Bobby’s sister, that she must have pot in the house. Now, she sat on the living room rug, fists clenched, recalling how her father had pried the lock from her diary when she’d refused to open it for him. He even read some of the entries! That was her private stuff; her innermost thoughts about things, and nobody, not even her father, had the right to do such a thing. There were even laws that protected a person’s privacy; she’d read about that in school. But now a slight smile crossed her lips, as the tears of rage and frustration ran down her cheeks. *He didn’t find the good ones, thank God, she recalled. What if he’d seen all that stuff about Richie?* In the end, the search had been futile—it’d turned up nothing but hostilities.

And a little later that night the fluorescent bulb above the mirror in the bathroom exploded. It wasn’t real late yet, and Sarah had been lying on her bed, thinking about the events that had transpired that evening. It just wasn’t fair. She’d done nothing to be treated like that by her father.

Then she heard the distinct, hollow ‘pop’ of the fluorescent tube. Her father let out a startled yelp, and she heard her mother anxiously inquiring what had happened. Sarah grinned in the darkness of her bedroom. It was kind of funny, really, almost like she knew what happened right then, though of course she couldn’t have. Some of the flying glass cut her father, but it wasn’t serious. Mom had put some antibiotic ointment on the cut under his eye, and then a Band-Aid.

By the time Sarah had crept down the hall to peer into the living room, her father was already back in his easy chair, looking at a magazine. Sarah had gone back to her room, not daring to let either of her parents know she was still awake. But sleep hadn’t come easily that night. Sarah kept hearing the light bulb explode, and her dad’s shout. She found it oddly satisfying; feeling like he’d deserved it after what had happened earlier.

The search of that evening hadn't turned out to be an isolated incident, as Sarah had initially hoped. The search procedures became a periodic event that was repeated randomly every couple of days. Sometimes they'd just search her room, sometimes just her brother's, and sometimes both. She'd quietly bought another diary, which she kept at home, never locked. Her mother and father frequently perused her entries, which now were nothing more incriminating than stuff about school, and vague comments about other students and teachers. Her old diary she now kept in her locker at school.

It was obvious, though, that neither she nor her brother would have any privacy any more. At random times, both she and her brother found their parents snooping around their rooms. Of course this was after a full two-week grounding for both of them, just another unfair part of their lives. Mom and Dad were sneaky about it, even when they weren't at home. She wondered how many times they'd been in her room when she'd been at school and never even knew about it. Bobby left home for the commune less than a month after 'the searches,' as they'd come to call them, had been instituted.

Sarah sighed, all the anger gone now, only hollow loneliness remained, as she thought about all of this. Her dad had called the police once they'd realized that Bobby was gone, but with no leads of any kind to go on, the search quickly went cold. Though the police had questioned her, Sarah had feigned ignorance as to her brother's plans. She didn't lie to the detective who'd questioned her, she'd rationalized; she really didn't know where her brother was...not exactly, anyway. All he'd said was that he was going to a hippie commune up north somewhere. All she'd heard was a mention of Prescott, and another, even smaller place called Hobbs a little to the north of Prescott. But that didn't mean that's where Bobby was; most likely, it was just a place where someone would pick him up. *Heck, he could be anywhere by now.* Pretty soon she'd leave too, once Bobby contacted her and told her where he was. She'd be gone so fast it'd make her parents' heads swim.

But there was that thought, brought on by the television show she'd watched. *What if Bobby didn't get the chance to leave? What if Dad accidentally beat him to death?* She shook her head, dismissing the thought as it passed through her mind. If her father would have done such a thing, it would've been that night when he was at his most angry. Once the searches had been initiated, dad had seemed a lot calmer. She guessed it was because he wasn't finding anything to be mad about.

She pushed herself to her feet, slouched into her room, and got ready for bed. When her parents got home, they'd probably watch something stupid on the television like the news or 'The Tonight Show' for the rest of the night. She took a long shower, trying to wash off the dredged up memories. It didn't work. As she dried herself, she glanced at her reflection in the mirror. She thought she was pretty cute. She dried her hair, put on the extra large tee shirt that was now a nightgown, and climbed into bed.

It was about eleven-thirty when her parents finally came home. Sarah heard the murmur of the Volvo's engine as it pulled into the drive—the gravel crunching under the wheels. This was followed immediately by the very faint rumbling of the garage door as it opened. She heard the door slide down again a moment later. In a minute they were inside. There was a slight jangle and clatter as Bob dropped his keys onto the ceramic tile of the kitchen floor, followed by a soft curse.

"Shh...you'll wake Sarah, then you'll be sorry," Lydia whispered. Sarah pushed herself up in bed, listening. She knew they'd been drinking when she heard her mother

giggle—that was about the only time she giggled and laughed like that and seemed to have fun. She heard her mother giggle again, but it was short lived. There was a moment's silence. *Kissing*, Sarah surmised. Then she heard her parent's bedroom door close softly, and there was an even deeper silence.

Sarah closed her eyes, but sleep eluded her, and she lay awake in her bed. She was having difficulty falling asleep. She heard a slight sound. *What was that?* She quietly got out of bed and tiptoed down the hall to her parents' room. Her mouth was dry. She was trembling. The door wasn't closed all the way; apparently the latch had stopped it when dad had pulled it shut. She felt lightheaded and nervous as she leaned to her left, and cautiously peeked into the room.

One table lamp was still turned on, and the faint pink light shone dully on the white-painted walls. She heard more than she saw, but she knew her parents were standing by the bed, close together, alternately drinking and kissing. She could just see her mother from her vantage point. She still had her shoes on; she was really loaded tonight. She put one hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh. She was spying on her parents!

"...some of the most interesting things happen at night, if you're awake to see them..."

Sarah caught her breath. *I shouldn't be doing this! How did Paul know?* Sarah had just pulled back from the slightly ajar door, when she heard someone walk to the night table. "Well...I've had enough for tonight," her mother said, in a slurred whisper. Her father mumbled something she couldn't make out, and her mother giggled again. Sarah heard the wine glass 'tink' as it bumped into the bottle as one of them set it on the night table. She crept slowly and silently back to her room where she quietly shut her door, feeling alternately elated that she'd actually spied on her parents, and ashamed for the same action. She was perspiring, and didn't feel hot. Why was that?

She'd deliberately spied on her parents. She felt ashamed—and a little excited, too. She lay in bed, her thoughts in turmoil. *Why did I do that? My own parents, for God's sake! Still, they spy on me, and they spied on Bobby.* Now she was feeling the anger again. *They deserved it.* She closed her eyes, her thoughts and emotions turning in her mind. No one saw the heavy glass ashtray on the living room table spinning crazily...