THE WAY HOME
An InCryptid Story
The Way Home

by

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Good idea: responding to nebulous reports of “acid-spitting salamanders” by getting the shotgun and heading for the woods to investigate. Even if she had to do it by sneaking out through her bedroom window, on account of she was grounded again. Someday, her father would understand why it was more important for her to spend time in the library than it was for her to do stupid things like trying out for the cheer squad. And about that time, pigs would fly.

Bad idea: going to investigate alone, three hours before she was supposed to be out of bed or would potentially be missed, without telling anyone where she was going or leaving a note behind. While wearing shorts. Without protective covering for her face or hands.

Worse idea: actually finding the damn salamanders, and confirming—the hard way—that yes, indeed, they spit acid.

Cursing herself for being Miss Natural Selection ’54, Alice put her arm up to protect her face, put her head down, and ran like her life depended on it. It wasn’t difficult to achieve that sort of speed; after all, technically, her life did depend on it. If those salamanders caught up with her, they sure weren’t going to be nice just because she’d gone into the woods without proper equipment. That actually struck her as the sort of thing that just got a person eaten.

Darkness had leached the color from the woods, leaving them a study in bleak blacks and grays. It wasn’t a full moon, so the swamp lights and will-o-wisps weren’t an issue—a small favor, considering everything else that had gone wrong since Alice slid down the drainpipe outside her room—but that also meant there was relatively little available light. She wasn’t quite running blind, but she was close enough to it that she could call it a kissing cousin and not be overstating matters.

Given the darkness, it really shouldn’t have been a surprise when she failed to see the tree before running head-first into the trunk, slamming her face hard against the rough wood. It shouldn’t have been a surprise, but it was.

Alice’s last, irritated thought before she hit the forest floor was that she should really have gone to Sally Duffy’s stupid party after all.

It was all like some sort of dreadful primary school math problem. A bus left Chicago heading toward a remote part of upper Michigan. The bus traveled at a rate of forty miles per hour, which should have meant that the drive would take a little under eight hours. Sadly, this math assumed that the bus was moving, something which it was not always inclined to do. If the bus stopped every fifty miles for a span of fifteen to forty-five minutes, allowing passengers to board, disembark, and mill around socializing while the driver had a smoke behind the depot, how long would it take for the exhausted Englishman sitting in the second row to snap, kill everyone on board, and claim the bus as his own? How long would it take him to hide the evidence? If he began his killing spree while at a remote bus stop, what were his chances of getting away, quite literally, with murder?

Thomas Price had always considered himself a reasonable man. Even when his thoughts and opinions had first started to diverge from those that were considered “acceptable” by his colleagues, he had endeavored to remain calm, collected, and capable of arguing his point. But if the man behind him persisted in describing his woes with what he called “the bait and tackle” for one more mile, Thomas might well be forced to stoop to extreme measures.
As if there were any measures extreme enough to get him out of this situation. He had done his best to be a good little soldier, and when he had failed at that, he had done his best to be a good little researcher, traveling the world at the Covenant’s behest, documenting the strange and wonderful things he found. Writing everything down so that it wouldn’t be forgotten after the hunters who were using his words as maps came sweeping through and washed the world clean of everything that should never have existed. He had tried, really he had.

But then he had come to Australia, and the Philippines, and Hawaii, and Japan. All those glorious little islands that had never been swept completely clean of monsters and of magic. He had managed to be mostly honest until he saw those places, which were so fragile, and so essential. The world would have been so much poorer if he had drawn maps to those places, if he had explained the ways to sweep them clean. And so, after a lifetime of honesty, he had set himself to learning how to become a better liar.

Thomas Price had always excelled at the things he chose to do. It had taken several years for the Covenant to become suspicious, and even when they had, they had been unable to prove, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that he was lying to them. Oh, he had covered his tracks well. The glorious monsters of those islands would never be caught, not by this generation of monster-hunters. They knew their enemy’s face. He had explained it to them enough times, patiently waiting for them to understand, and if there had been any question in his mind as to their intelligence, it had been answered when they had looked at him, one after the other, and said, “I will beware.”

Perhaps it had been inevitable that someone would begin to question his calm descriptions of landscapes untroubled by monsters, country after country and island after island where the Covenant was unwanted and unneeded. Why should they go where there was nothing to slay? Perhaps it had been inevitable that a team would be dispatched, quietly and without his knowledge, to verify his findings.

His superiors still didn’t know for sure that he had lied. Monsters could be tricky. They could have hidden themselves from a single man on an exploratory mission. As his work had been exemplary until that point—until the point when, he admitted quietly to himself, he had begun falsifying data in an effort to save lives—they weren’t quite ready to call him “traitor” and lock him away to be forgotten. No, they had devised a much more elegant punishment. He, who had seen wars and wonders and untouched vistas, was being sent into exile.

In Michigan. Upstate Michigan, as if that made all the difference in the world; as if he should be delighted to spend an untold number of years in a place that believed worth could be measured in how many lakes you had. He wasn’t even being sent to look for signs of monsters, although he was to keep an eye on something similar: Alexander and Enid Healy, the great traitors of his father’s generation. They had settled in a place called “Buckley Township” with their youngest son, and were apparently making quite a name for themselves among the creatures and aberrations of the North American continent.

According to his instructions, he was to keep his distance; monitor their movements; and document any offspring they or Jonathan might have produced since last the Covenant had set eyes upon them. There were rumors of children, perhaps young enough to be carried back to Europe and reeducated in the ways of the sword and the bow and the executioner’s axe. If he could, he was to keep himself from being noticed at all, blending into the town and becoming a part of the background—unseen, unremarked upon, and entirely overlooked.

Thomas was fairly sure that the people who were responsible for his instructions hadn’t left their libraries and comfortable sitting rooms in a decade or more. They certainly hadn’t tried to approach a family of paranoid, famously dangerous traitors.
No, Thomas Price had plans of his own. But before he could put them into motion, he had to accomplish the most dangerous feat of all. He had to make it to Buckley without killing everyone else on the bus.

Thomas closed his eyes, and thought of England, which—if he was lucky—he was never going to see again.

Alice woke slowly. Her mouth tasted like bog, a nasty combination of mud, peat moss, and her own blood. She raised a hand and felt her face gingerly. She’d managed to split her lip when she ran into the tree, but that seemed to be the worst of her injuries; the rest were just superficial scrapes and bruises, and she still had all of her teeth. That was a nice bonus. She hadn’t really been looking forward to getting home and explaining her upcoming dental bills to her father.

The sun was up. Judging by the light filtering through the trees, it was somewhere in the late morning, and she’d been asleep for hours. That was not such a nice bonus. Her father was going to kill her when he found out she’d not only gone into the woods alone, but she’d managed to parley it into accidentally skipping school.

She tried to stand. Her legs didn’t respond. That was…even less nice than the fact that the sun was up. Heart sinking, Alice twisted and looked over her shoulder, quickly identifying the source of the problem. It wasn’t unreasonable that she couldn’t move her legs, considering the big green pod-thing that had closed over them to the thigh. Really, it was much more unreasonable for her to have expected them to move in the first place.

Cautiously, Alice concentrated on her toes. She could feel them, still wrapped in her thick woolen socks and crammed down into her slightly too-small hiking shoes, which had been a gift from her grandmother on her last birthday. She might be willing to go out into the woods in shorts when the weather was nice, but she would no more go out in the delicate, impractical shoes that the other girls in her class liked than she would go out without a bra, or without extra ammunition. Being sixteen was hard enough without getting eaten because she didn’t like the way bullets stretched the pockets of her culottes.

So whatever had enveloped her legs, it hadn’t actually started to digest them yet, possibly because it was trying to figure out how to deal with her shoes. That was a good sign. Alice closed her eyes and focused on the sounds of the wood around her. The frickens were singing. There were no bigger cowards in the wood than the frickens, which made sense—they were small and soft and most things seemed to think that they were delicious. So whatever was chewing on her was either something that didn’t eat frickens, or it was something that hunted so slow the frickens didn’t take much notice of it.

Put “green,” “ambush predator,” and “hasn’t chewed my legs off yet,” and it wasn’t hard to come up with “probably a plant.” Alice opened her eyes and attempted to squirm into a position that would let her reach the thing that had hold of her, all the while wracking her brain looking for a name to pin on the thing. Vegetable predators weren’t all that common, thankfully. Barnacle geese mostly didn’t eat people, although they had a tendency to hiss and honk a lot. Screaming yams were adorable, delicious, and harmless. Whatever this was, it either wasn’t common or wasn’t native. Possibly both.

Most of the time, Alice would have taken a moment to gaze in wonder at the thing, which was a species she’d never seen before, after all, and was hence worthy of being regarded with a fair degree of awe. Most of the time, she didn’t make the acquaintance of a new species when it tried to eat her. Under the circumstances, she felt that reacting with irritation and yes, violence was acceptable.
By twisting her hips hard to the side, Alice was able to lever herself into an uncomfortable half-sitting, half-lounging position. She pushed against the ground with her left arm and pulled the knife from her belt with her right. Her father kept trying to convince her that respectable young ladies didn’t go around with knives shoved into their drawers. That might be true, but if it were, then respectable young ladies were probably eaten by monsters on a pretty regular basis.

“I’m very sorry about this, whatever-you-are,” she said apologetically. “I’m sure you’re very pretty, and that you serve an important ecological role in whatever sort of place it is you come from. But right now, you’re trying to eat me, and I don’t like that very much.” With the sort of niceties that one could really only observe with extremely slow monsters out of the way, Alice began carefully working her knife under the edge of the big green thing.

It was slow going. The creature, whatever it was, had been working on sucking her in for a while, and it had formed a very good seal against her skin. Fortunately, it hadn’t gotten around to digestion just yet, and she had an excellent knife.

After enough time spent cutting that her arms were going numb—the one from supporting her body weight, the other from trying to cut the plant without cutting herself—the thing finally decided that she wasn’t worth the trouble, and opened itself like a flower blossoming, revealing the beautiful turquoise and purple petals that it had been concealing. Alice scooted backward as quickly as she could, not caring how much mud she got on herself in the process. The thing was beautiful, sure, and it had a lovely perfume, like a mixture of apples and ripe strawberries, and that was swell, that was just fine and dandy, but it also had teeth. Dozens of them, like fishhooks leading down the center body of the plant, into what she assumed had to be its digestive system.

“Gosh, you’re pretty, and gosh, no thank you,” she said, finally allowing herself to look down at her legs and feet. They were intact. Covered in a thin layer of viscous slime that smelled faintly of the thing’s perfume, but intact, which was really what mattered. She attempted to stand. Her attempt was quickly thwarted by gravity, which had other ideas. The plant-thing must have had some sort of numbing agent on its petals. That explained a lot, including how it was able to engulf her without waking her up. The affected parts of her body had just...gone to sleep. Her feet must have been spared by her thick shoes.

“I have never loved a pair of shoes this much in my life,” she muttered, and resumed scooting backward. Eventually, as she had hoped, her back hit a tree trunk. She looked up, scanning the branches for threats. There was nothing visible, and the frickens were still singing. They’d never let her down before. She was willing to trust that they weren’t letting her down now.

Alice’s legs still weren’t working very well, but that was all right. Her physical education teachers had always been impressed by the number of pull-ups she could do, saying that she had remarkable upper body strength for a girl. Her father had been less complimentary about it, saying that no boy was ever going to want a girl who could beat him in an arm-wrestling competition. Showed what he knew: she didn’t think any boy was ever going to want a girl who’d been digested by a giant plant monster from the swamp, and it was only her ability to haul herself, hand over hand, into the safety of the branches that was saving her from that particular fate.

By the time she made it into the tree, her head was spinning, and an odd lassitude was spreading through her entire body. She had time to wonder whether the plant might have been venomous in addition to everything else, and then—for the second time in less than eight hours—Alice lost consciousness, sliding down into the dark where nothing could hurt her.

Much.
The bus—which had been scheduled to arrive at the Buckley Township stop by two o’clock in the afternoon—pulled off the highway shortly after four. It took another half hour for them to roll to a leisurely stop, in front of a little sign that had been tacked up in front of the post office almost as an afterthought. The people of Buckley did not, it seemed, value access to the outside world the way that they ought.

Thomas’s stomach had been sinking since they’d first driven out of the woods and into view of the township. It was a sleepy, bucolic looking little place, the sort of community where someone from the outside would be “the newcomer” for fifty years. The Covenant’s original plan hadn’t just been wrongheaded: it had been foolish in the extreme, and represented a total failure on the part of the research division.

Assuming any research had been done in the first place. Thomas rose and filed off the bus with the other disembarking passengers, clutching his travel valise and considering, not for the first time, the possibility that this was an elaborate way of both testing his loyalty and tying up loose ends. If he stood out too much, there was a good chance the Healys would take care of him the easy way, and simply attempt to kill him. He didn’t know how many of them there were, how well prepared they were for an attack, or how much they had kept up their training. Even more importantly, he didn’t know if he would be capable of firing the first shot.

He had been a killer for the Covenant, when necessity arose. He had never shied away from getting his hands dirty. But he had never been an assassin, and he wasn’t going to allow them to turn him into one now.

According to the dossier he had been provided, the deed to his new, if temporary, home would be waiting for him at the bank, which would be open for—he checked his watch—another thirty minutes. If he didn’t want to sleep in a field tonight, he would have to make it to the bank before they closed, as they were apparently quite strict about closing on time.

Thomas had slept in fields before, of course, and in things that were far less pleasant than fields. But he had never done it on his first night in a new community, and he had certainly never done it without making a proper survey of the area first. If he wanted to have any confidence that he was not going to be devoured by something unpleasant while his eyes were closed—which was to say, if he wanted to get any rest at all—he had to reach the bank in a timely fashion.

The bus driver had secured their luggage in a compartment beneath the vehicle, and if this stop was to be anything like all the others, he wasn’t going to feel any real urgency about getting it off. Thomas positioned himself outside the bus doors and, when the driver emerged, cleared his throat politely.

The bus driver ignored him.

Clearly, a more forward approach was necessary. Thomas cleared his throat again before asking, “Sir, if I were to step away on a brief errand, what would happen to my baggage?”

The bus driver turned to blink at him, expression broadcasting disbelief. “Excuse me?”

“I have to get to the bank before they close, you see, and if I fail to do that I’m going to have a great deal of trouble tonight. So if I were to step away to take care of that, what would happen to my baggage?”
The bus driver bristled. “It would be left by the side of the road, that’s what. You’ll wait like everyone else. Now if you’ll excuse me.” He went stomping off, presumably to find someplace private where he could have a smoke.

Thomas was weighing the value of having a place to sleep against the cost of his remaining worldly possessions—which wouldn’t have been such a problem if he hadn’t put all his notebooks in the suitcase for safekeeping—when a hand touched his elbow. He managed, barely, not to go for one of his throwing knives before turning to face the hand’s owner. “Yes?”

The hand belonged to a pleasant-faced woman in a pale blue dress. “I’m terribly sorry for eavesdropping, but I couldn’t help hearing your accent. Are you related to Mr. Healy over at the library?”

“We have family in common,” said Thomas, with careful honesty. He was quite sure that if he followed the Price family tree through all its possible twists and bends, he would find a distant cousin who had married a Healy twelve generations back. There were none within the past eight generations, but that didn’t matter much in the face of the Covenant’s careful genealogy and planned marriages.

“I thought so,” said the woman, smiling broadly. “As soon as I heard you, I said ‘that’s a Healy boy, come home to his folks.’ Is your name on your bag?”

“Ah, yes,” said Thomas. “There’s a leather tag reading ‘Price’ on the handle.”

“I’ll wait here and pick it up for you. Wouldn’t do to have your first day here in Buckley get all complicated, now would it?”

He hesitated. On the one hand, he would be leaving his bags in the custody of a stranger. On the other hand, if she proved to be dishonest, at least he’d know who he was tracking down. “Thank you for your kind offer. I’ll be right back.” He started to turn, and then paused, looking back at her, and asked, “Which way is the bank?”

The woman pointed. Thomas took off at a quick walk. After he had safely crossed the street, he turned it into a run.

Thomas Price arrived in front of the Buckley Township Bank and Trust ten minutes before five o’clock in the afternoon. The sole teller who was still at her post looked up at the sound of the front door banging open, and blinked at the sight of the tall, wiry man who was now proceeding across the lobby toward her. He had dark hair, which didn’t appear to have been combed in some time, a ground-in tan, and the sharpest cheekbones she’d ever seen on a living person. He was also frowning, and the look on his face made her want to crawl under her counter and hide.

When he was close enough to speak without shouting, he said, “Excuse me, miss; my name is Thomas Price, and I believe your manager is holding something for me.” He had an English accent, much stronger than Mr. Healy’s at the library, but still recognizably from the same part of the world. He sounded exhausted. England was a long way from Michigan.

“Are you Johnny Healy’s older brother?” she asked, curiosity getting the better of her. Then she shook her head, answering her own question. “No, you can’t be, different last name. Cousin?”

“Friend of the family,” he said mildly. “Please, it’s very important that I get this all sorted away before you close.”

“Yes, of course, Mr. Price,” said the teller. “Please wait here. I’ll be right back.” She slid off her stool
and trotted for the manager’s office at the back of the bank.

For the first time since arriving in Chicago, Thomas was actually alone.

He took a deep breath of the slightly stale lobby air, trying to force some of the tension out of his shoulders. He’d need to set up a sparring dummy first thing, something he could use to stay limber and relaxed. It would be better if he could find an actual person who was willing to spar with him, but that would require one of the Healys to think keeping a Covenant agent in shape was a good idea. Somehow, he didn’t consider that very likely.

The sound of footsteps approaching caught his attention. He raised his head and stood a little straighter, trying to look respectable despite the miasma of travel that hung around him like a fog. The teller had returned, along with a portly, red-faced man in his late forties whose thinning hair had been brushed over his scalp like a prayer to the gods on male pattern baldness for a reprieve.

“Mr. Price?” asked the man, whom Thomas assumed must be the bank manager. “I didn’t think you were going to make it today.”

“I wasn’t sure myself,” said Thomas, gripping his valise a little tighter and trying not to think about his suitcase. “I was told you would have the necessary paperwork for my taking ownership of my new home?”

The house had been purchased, sight unseen, by the Covenant’s accountants. The money had been wired from a dozen untraceable accounts to a single, large account in his name, established in New York City and left intact just long enough for his new life to be bought and paid for. The car he was intended to use while in town would be waiting in the garage of the house, and if there was anything to make it perfectly clear that he was by no means forgiven, it was the fact that the car had been bought in Buckley. His handlers could have made that purchase in Chicago and allowed him to drive himself, but no. That would have been too easy, and too kind to a man who was, after all, in disgrace.

“That’s correct,” said the bank manager. “If I could see some ID…?”

Thomas presented his passport.

Ten minutes, twenty signatures, and several prying questions later, the bank manager handed over an envelope containing the deed to a house on Old Logger’s Road and two sets of keys, one to the house, and one to the car. “There’s a map, if you need it,” said the bank manager, who had never bothered to give his name. “It’s a bit of a walk, but you should be able to get there before sundown.”


“Welcome to Buckley Township, Mr. Price,” said the bank manager. His smile was professional; it had teeth. “Mind where you step.”

“I shall,” said Thomas, and fled the bank for the bus stop, where he hoped the woman—or at least his suitcase—would be waiting.

The second time Alice crawled back to consciousness, it was late afternoon—late enough that the sun was starting to flirt with the tops of the trees, as if it might set at any moment. She glared at what she could see of the sky. It was bad enough that she’d apparently spent most of the day passed out in the middle of the woods. The last thing she needed now was for the sun to go down before she’d figured
out exactly where she was and how to get home. The woods were a lot more dangerous at night. There were...things...that didn’t appreciate the sunlight, but were more than happy to eat you in the dark.

Speaking of things that wanted to eat her: she turned to look back toward her vegetable attacker. It was still open, petals spread and perfuming the air around it with that curious apples-and-strawberries perfume. She wished she had a sketchbook with her, so that she could try to get the shape of the petals right.

“Grandpa is going to be really curious about you,” she informed the flower, feeling more confident now that she knew for a fact that it couldn’t climb trees. She swung her legs as she spoke, confirming that they were back in working order. They felt fine—strong, normal, and fully equipped to bear her weight. Well, that was a good thing. It was hard to find the way home when you couldn’t walk.

Carefully, in case she was being overly optimistic about her legs, Alice shimmied down the tree. The frickens, which had been singing the whole time she was asleep, fell silent as they watched her go.

It was easier to get back to the ground than it had been to get away from it: in short order, Alice was standing at the base of the tree, looking warily around for signs of trouble. The big Alice-eating flower spread its petals a little wider, just in case she could be coaxed into coming back. Alice shot it a glare and moved a few feet away from it before looking up at the sky. The sun was low. Too low for her to feel confident about getting out of the woods before it was fully down. Worse, it was too low for her to use it to tell her where she actually was.

Buckley Township was a great place to grow up, according to her grandparents, located as it was in the dead middle of nowhere. It was a terrible place to grow up as far as her father was concerned, for basically the same reason. He didn’t like Alice having unfettered access to woods and lakes and other places that could potentially be full of things that wanted to treat her to a quick and messy end. She sort of understood why—her grandparents had spent enough time trying to explain it to her—but most of the time, she came down firmly on the side of loving her hometown, and loving the woods around it even more.

Trouble was, there were literally miles of woods to love, and she didn’t know where in them she was. The salamanders had been faster than she’d expected, and had chased her with such surprising dedication that she hadn’t really paid any attention to where she was going. She’d just run, as hard as she could, until she’d slammed into the tree and stopped her own escape.

The salamanders must have given up while she was still running, she realized, or she would have been melted off her bones before she could have woken up. But that meant they could be anywhere back along the way she’d come from—assuming she could even figure out which way that was.

“Lost in the woods with two knives, one pistol, and no trousers,” said Alice. Then she shrugged, philosophically. “Could be worse. Could be raining.”

When the sky did not crack open and dump an ocean on her head as punishment for her insolence, Alice smiled to herself and started walking. She stuck her tongue out at the giant flower as she passed it. It seemed only fair.

The woods around Buckley had two states: proper forest, and practically a swamp. The woods near her house tended to be proper forest, since they were a good distance from the lake. The woods nearer the lake tended to practically a swamp, thanks to the proximity of the water—but since the town had been built around the lake, the swampier the woods got, the more likely she was to find her way back to civilization. That was, of course, unless she had managed to get so far off course that she was moving toward a different lake, one that was maybe less attached to a town and more attached to a family of
skunk apes or the like.

“Probably gonna die out here,” said Alice, as much to hear her own voice as anything else. She didn’t believe in moving quietly unless she was hunting or hiding. At the moment, she wasn’t doing either, and giving good warning to any bears or wolves or tailypo that might be lurking seemed like a good idea. Besides, it wasn’t like she was actually all that worried. If she didn’t find her way out of the woods by sunset, her father would probably come in looking for her. That was when the real trouble would start.

Alice walked a little faster.

Jonathan Healy wasn’t what you’d call a bad person—not really. According to her grandparents, and to the mice, he’d been a bold adventurer once. Why, he’d fought hives full of Apraxis wasps, and he’d brokered peace between groups of gorgons, and he’d even helped a whole town of finfolk figure out how to ease their way into the modern world. To hear the mice talk, he was a hero in every sense of the word.

Alice thought she’d met that man, once upon a time. What the mice said rang true on a deep level, the level where she still kept her memories of her mother, and the tattered scraps of her belief in Santa Claus. Maybe her father had been a hero, once upon a time…but all that had changed when her mother had died.

They lived in Buckley, because her grandparents insisted, and because there wasn’t anywhere else that they could go without the specter of the Covenant of St. George hanging over them. According to Grandpa, the Covenant would be more than happy to snap up a half-grown Healy girl and take her in for “reeducation”: she was still young enough that they could at least try to mold her to their cause. The Healys had been good little killers for generations, and the Covenant didn’t like letting go of their toys. Leaving Buckley would mean putting themselves in harm’s way. As much as her father hated the temptation her grandparents represented—the temptation to learn the things her mother had known, to be the Priestess the mice entreated her to be—he hated the Covenant even more.

Alice hated them too, as a matter of principle, but sometimes she thought she loved them at the same time. If it hadn’t been for the Covenant, her father would have carried her away as soon as her mother was in the ground, and she would never have known how much she loved the woods. According to her grandmother, everything in the world existed for a reason, providing some sort of balance in the ecosystem it belonged to. Maybe that extended to the Covenant.

She’d still shoot on sight if she ever met anyone from there. She wasn’t stupid.

Alice continued to walk, noting with trepidation that the ground wasn’t getting squishier, but the sun was definitely getting lower. It was possible to walk for miles without hitting a road or town. It was harder to walk for miles without hitting a lake, but if she was at the exact right wrong angle, she could still do it.

“Maybe I’ll walk all the way to Canada,” she grumbled.

Something rustled in the bushes to her left.

Being a sensible girl who had managed to live to the ripe age of sixteen despite twice-weekly unsupervised trips into the deep woods, Alice froze. The rustling was repeated, and a small possum ran out into the open. It sat down a few feet in front of the bush, rubbing its cunning little paws over its muzzle and looking as endearing as it was possible for a possum to look. Alice narrowed her eyes.
“No,” she said. “I know what you are. Shoo.”

The possum rubbed its muzzle again. Alice stooped and picked up a good sized rock, hefting it in her hand.

“No,” she repeated.

The possum moved forward a few inches. Alice chucked the rock at it.

She might not have had as much training as she would have liked, but she had always had excellent natural aim, and she had practiced as much as she could get away with, using her slingshot, her knives, and the pistols her grandfather pretended not to know she’d stolen from the armory. When she threw a rock, she threw it true. It hit the possum, which squeaked and went limp.

“I know you’re not dead,” said Alice, crossing her arms. “Come out of there and stop trying to scare me. It’s not going to work.”

The possum twitched before sliding backward into the bushes. A few seconds later a tortoise the size of a small boulder clomped out into the open. It had an oversized head, the better to contain its sophisticated tongue-lure, and if a tortoise could be said to glare, this one was glaring at her. Alice dropped her arms.

“I’m too big for you to eat and you know it,” she said. “Don’t try that again.” Secretly, she was pleased. If there was an angler tortoise in this part of the wood, then she wasn’t going to run into some of the bigger, faster predators. Bears didn’t really enjoy the company of angler tortoises, for instance. Something about the big reptiles having jaws strong enough to bite paws off. Bat-leeches also tended to avoid angler tortoises. She didn’t know why that was, and while she supposed she’d be curious about it eventually, right now, she was just relieved.

The tortoise looked at her before beginning to plod away. Alice glanced once more at the sky, and then kept moving. It was almost sunset. She was going to be in a world of trouble if she didn’t find her way back to town soon.

The woman—whose name was Shelly—was still waiting when Thomas returned for his bag. That was a small mercy, quickly eroded as she latched onto his arm and began telling him all about Buckley, which she swore was a bustling metropolis masquerading as a sleepy Michigan township. She worked at the beauty parlor, and baked a mean cherry pie, which she would be happy to share with him if he ever wanted to drop by. In the end, he escaped with his suitcase and his skin, although he was dimly afraid that he had agreed to come over for dinner sometime after he was settled.

Ah, well. It wasn’t like he was equipped to cook much of anything that didn’t involve a campfire. He’d buy kitchen equipment eventually, and until then, a few meals with friendly townspeople wouldn’t go amiss. It would make him seem more like he was fitting in.

According to the map he’d received at the bank, his new house was located at the outskirts of town. To get there, he would walk down Main Street to Woodview Drive, and from there to Old Logger’s Road. His new home was, naturally, the last house on the map. Anything closer would have been too convenient for someone who was, after all, in disgrace.

“Charming,” muttered Thomas, and began to walk.
It was quickly apparent that while the streets on the map were correct, the distances were approximate at best. His suit had been chosen to look respectable, not to remain comfortable after walking more than a mile. His shoes were much the same. And all the while the sun was dipping lower, until he was walking past endless fields of corn and grain in the gloaming, with the forest looming ever closer on the horizon.

“Charming,” he muttered again, this time with more venom, and hoped that the Covenant—while not inclined to do him any favors at the moment—had at least seen to having the power turned on when they purchased the house. They wanted him to understand that he was in disgrace. They didn’t want him dead…or if they did, they had certainly chosen a roundabout way of accomplishing it.

He reached his new home almost two hours after his bus had pulled into Buckley, and for a moment he simply stood and stared at the ramshackle, almost asymmetrical structure. It was difficult to tell whether it was three or four stories high; the windows seemed to move when he looked away from them, the shadows and the lines of the house conspiring to make them impossible to count. The porch listed at one end, and the chains that had once held a swing still dangled, rusty and abandoned. Someone had taken the time to freshen up the paint when they heard the place was to be sold. The end result was that the house appeared to have contracted a bad case of leprosy.

“Charming,” he said, for the third and hopefully final time.

The porch steps creaked under his weight, but they didn’t break, and his key fit the lock. There was a switch inside. He flipped it, barely aware that he was holding his breath until the living room light came to watery, flickering life. It was weak, unsuitable for reading or for fine handwork. It was sufficient for him to see what was there to be seen.

It wasn’t much. The place had doubtless been advertised as “furnished,” which would have appealed to the Covenant accountants who were responsible for getting him settled in his new home, and indeed, there was furniture: an empty bookshelf on the verge of collapse, and a large, overstuffed couch that might have been red once, before years of dust, cobwebs, and neglect had bleached it to an unpleasant shade of dusty wine.

“Oh, yes,” he said, closing the door and looking toward the stairs. “I feel like I’m home already.”

The sun was almost down, and Alice Healy had never been so lost in her entire life.

It felt like she’d been walking forever. Her feet hurt, her legs ached, and her stomach was growling continuously. She hadn’t passed any good berry patches, and the few mushrooms she’d found had been poisonous. Most of the time the woods took care of their own, but this day seemed to have been designed to vex her in every possible way. At this point, she wouldn’t have been surprised if it had decided to start snowing just to add that extra special little something to her trials.

On the plus side, as long as she was wandering in the woods, her father wasn’t killing her. That was a good thing, right? Stay lost, stay alive. It was a plan that had its drawbacks, true, but it was a plan that didn’t end at the funeral home, and that made it all right by her.

She did wish she had a flashlight, though. And since she had no idea where she actually was, or where she was going, she was starting to worry about looping back around and finding the salamanders again. Could salamanders hold grudges?
Then, without warning, a light glistened through the trees ahead and to the left. Alice hesitated. It was dark enough that people might be putting their porch lights on. She might have found her way back to human habitation. Or it could be a swamp light, or a will-o-wisp, looking to lure her to her untimely demise.

“So’s everything else out here,” she said, and adjusted her path so that she was hiking toward the light.

The trees began to thin. Alice kept walking, until finally—wonderfully—the trees stopped, and she was stepping out into the untended fields at the end of Old Logger’s Road. There was the Parrish Place, as decrepit and falling-down as ever, although someone had slapped a fresh coat of paint the color of swamp muck over the nasty old thing. She wrinkled her nose. Maybe it looked better by daylight. Probably not, though.

And the porch light was on.

Alice blinked. Someone was inside the Parrish Place? Someone had bothered to get the power turned back on? Maybe it was a ghost. A really stupid ghost who didn’t know that there were better places in town to haunt. Like anyplace.

But her feet hurt, and her legs ached, and she was curious to a fault sometimes. Her Grandma always said that was the thing that would eventually get her in a heap of trouble: once something caught her interest, she just couldn’t stop poking at it until she understood what it was about. Alice squared her shoulders, ran a hand through her hair, and started toward the house.

Thomas was attempting to figure out the kitchen plumbing—not to the point of calling himself an expert, just to the point of making himself a nice cup of coffee before he went to the garage and took his first ride in his new car—when someone knocked on the door. He paused, turning to look over his shoulder.

Whoever it was knocked again.

“Perhaps I’m in the wrong house,” he said, turning off the tap. “This one was too nice for me from the start.” Chuckling weakly at his own joke, he walked from the kitchen to the front room, and onward to the front door. He opened it. He stopped.

“Er,” he said.

The person on the porch was not the bank manager, come to tell him that he had the wrong house. Nor was it Shelly, come to deliver some of her delicious cherry pie. Instead, it was a teenage girl, probably somewhere in the neighborhood of sixteen, wearing a blouse that might have been white if it hadn’t been covered in thick mud, cut-off shorts that barely skirted the edges of decency, and a pair of surprisingly sturdy looking hiking boots. Her hair was blonde under the filth, and hung in mud-clotted hanks around her face. She was possibly the dirtiest person he had ever seen outside of a mud pit. She might qualify as a mud pit.

She was lovely. But that was almost incidental.

For her part, she looked as surprised to see him as he was to see her. “Um,” she said. “You do know this is the old Parrish Place, yes?”

“For a country that is effectively still in its infancy, you Americans are terribly fond of labeling things
as ‘old,’” he said. “No, I didn’t know. I’m sorry, did friends of yours live here?”

“I wasn’t even born when Mr. Parrish decided to kill his whole family in order to gain the favor of the god from the swamp,” said the muddy girl. “I’m only sixteen.”

“My apologies,” said Thomas. “If you’re not looking for a friend of yours, do you mind my asking why you are on my porch?” Wearing half of a swamp as an accessory. Perhaps she was an acolyte of the god she had mentioned, and was here to preach to him of the glory of the marsh and fen. He rather thought he’d listen, if she could figure out how to turn the stove on.

“Oh, yeah,” said the girl. “I sort of got lost in the woods, and your porch light helped me find my way out. Thanks for that, even if you didn’t really mean to do it. Um. I’m Alice.” She stuck out one muddy hand for him to shake.

After a moment’s pause, he took it. “Thomas Price,” he said. “I’m afraid I bought the place sight unseen, and the real estate listing didn’t mention any brutal murders that may or may not have happened here. If I’d known about the entire ‘swamp god’ aspect of the property, I would have at least tried to get a better deal.”

Alice squinted at him like she wasn’t sure whether he was kidding or not. She reclaimed her hand, which had left a thin layer of mud on his palm. “Well, welcome to Buckley. I recommend not getting lost in the woods.”

She smelled, he realized, of an odd mixture of strawberries and apples. It could have been her perfume. Teenage girls were fond of perfume, were they not? Still… “Pardon me for asking, but you have a rather distinct aroma following you. Did you by any chance encounter an unusually large and attractive flower in the woods?”

“Well, yea big?” she asked, sketching a distance of approximately four feet with her hands.

Thomas nodded. “Yes, yes, that would be about right.”

“Nope. That sort of thing wouldn’t be natural, and there’s nothing unnatural in these woods.” She was a remarkably good liar. If not for the sudden glossiness of her eyes, he might even have believed her.

“I see,” he said. “Well, if you happened to see such a flower, I would suggest avoiding it. Swamp bromeliads are beautiful, but they’re quite dangerous, in their own way.”

“Don’t I know it,” muttered Alice. Then she smiled at him, so brightly that for a moment, he could almost overlook the mud. “I know it’s an imposition, but do you mind if I just sit down for a minute before I start walking home? I can find some newspapers or something, so I won’t mess up your couch…”

“To be honest, I’m not sure the couch will notice,” he said, and stepped to the side, holding the door open a little wider. “Please, come in.”

Alice stepped inside. She looked around herself shamelessly, and when Thomas raised an eyebrow she explained, “I’ve never been inside the Parrish Place before. Grandma always said that people who go poking around in slaughterhouses wind up getting what they deserve, and it probably wouldn’t be flowers.”

“What a charming lady she must be,” said Thomas. “Did you grow up around here, then?”
“Buckley born and raised,” said Alice. She walked to the couch and sat down, closing her eyes in momentary bliss before she continued, “If you need someone to show you around, I’d be happy to. It’s a worthwhile trade for letting me muddy up your couch.”

“I don’t know whether I should say ‘but not the woods’ or ‘especially the woods,’ given that you appear to have survived being lost there for quite some time,” said Thomas. “Can I get you a glass of water? Forgive me for saying so, but you look exhausted.”

“Water would be swell, thank you,” said Alice. She didn’t open her eyes.

Really, it shouldn’t have been a surprise when he returned from the kitchen to find her sound asleep. Thomas paused, unsure of what he should do next. Then, with a shrug, he placed the water on the floor next to the couch, where she would hopefully find it upon waking, and moved his suitcase into the front hall closet, which had a lock. If she woke up and started snooping around the house, she might figure out where the bathroom was located. It would be doing him a favor—and right now, he had a social call to make.

According to the notes he had received from the Covenant, the Healys lived near the edge of the wood, although not so near as he did. Getting to their house meant either a hike across several fields, or a pointlessly complicated series of turns down little country roads. Since he wanted them to hear him coming, he took the car.

Really, he should probably have been grateful to the Covenant for supplying him with a vehicle at all, he mused, as he tried to coax his new car along the unfamiliar roads. The fact that it was a terrible vehicle was almost certainly accidental…and if he could convince himself to believe that, he could probably convince himself to go back to believing whatever he was told, like a good little soldier who didn’t have to be banished to the ends of the Earth.

He pulled up in front of the Healy house, which was brightly lit, with open windows and solid, refreshingly well-maintained walls. He stopped the car and looked at the house for a long moment, weighing his options. Once he walked up to that door, he was committed: he would never be able to take this back. It was not, as yet, too late to go home, rouse the sleeping teenager from his living room, and fulfill his mission as stated, instead of deviating, once again, in the name of preserving something unique and wonderful. He could still give himself the option of going home.

He got out of the car.

Walking up to the door was surprisingly easy, once he had made the decision to do it. He could hear voices from inside, muffled by the door. After a moment of consideration, he rang the bell.

The voices went silent. Footsteps followed, and finally, the door was pulled open by an older woman with the distinct bone structure and slightly dubious expression of a born Carew—Enid Healy’s maiden name. She was wearing denim trousers and a fitted shirt that probably concealed half a dozen weapons, and while she was smiling politely, she didn’t look pleased to have him on her porch.

“Good evening,” she said. “May I help you?”

“Do I have the pleasure of addressing Mrs. Enid Healy, of the Buckley Healys?” he asked.

Enid’s eyes narrowed at the sound of his voice. She had to know what it meant when she heard someone who sounded like her old home—and England, while not the same as Wales, was very close
to where she had originated. “You might,” she said. “Who’s calling?”

“My name is Thomas Price,” he said, and sealed his fate. The Covenant would never take him back now. “I’ve been sent to observe your family and report back to my superiors. As I feel that is a bloody stupid idea, I’ve decided not to do it, but thought I should tell you I was here anyway, just to prevent someone ‘accidentally’ slipping and putting a bullet in the back of my skull. I quite like my skull in its current configuration. A bullet would disrupt it.”

Enid blinked slowly. Then, without turning, she called, “Alex? We’ve got a problem.”

A man appeared behind her. He looked to be a little older than she was, and the years had worked deep lines into the skin of his face. He frowned at the sight of Thomas, assessing the other man in an instant before he asked, “Are you a Price boy?”

“Yes, sir,” said Thomas.

“He says the Covenant sent him to spy on us,” said Enid.

“Yes to that as well,” said Thomas.

Alexander blinked. “And you came here to announce it?” he asked, incredulously. “Son, I don’t know what they’re teaching spies these days, but this is a good way to wind up in a ditch somewhere.”

“I thought that skulking about and trying to conceal myself from you seemed even more likely to put me into a shallow grave,” said Thomas.

“Oh, come now,” said Enid. “We’d bury you properly. We’re not amateurs, and we’re not ill-mannered either.”

“That’s a relief,” said Thomas. He looked to Alexander. “I have no intention of reporting on you to the Covenant. This is a punishment for my crimes, and I intend to endure my sentence without making life more difficult for anyone else.”

“What did you do?” asked Enid.

“I lied,” said Thomas. “I falsified information. I told the Covenant there was nothing of interest in places where there was quite a good deal to be interested in, because the people and creatures who lived in those places deserved to be left alone. I warned monsters of coming purges, and I followed my own judgment rather than obeying orders. I’m quite the villain, all things considered.”

“My,” said Enid. “You have been a naughty boy.”

Alexander coughed into his hand. “It seems we have a great deal to talk about, Mr. Price, but for the moment, you’ll have to excuse us. We seem to have misplaced our granddaughter, and our son is a bit upset.”

“Now, dear,” said Enid. “Alice is perfectly capable of misplacing herself.”

Thomas looked between them, his stomach sinking. And things had been starting to go so well. “Alice, you say?”

“Yes,” said Enid. “About yea high,” she held up a hand, “blonde hair, blue eyes, and less sense than God gave to a bloodworm. She didn’t make it to school today, and her father’s set to give himself some sort of an attack.” She didn’t sound particularly worried. Alice must have wandered off with some
regularly.

Somehow, Thomas didn’t think that was going to help his case. He took a deep breath. “About that…” he began.

Alice was asleep, dreaming, and not being eaten by anything, which was a considerable improvement over the past day. Because of that, she had no warning before she was being grabbed by the wrist and hauled bodily off the couch.

Being a Healy girl, she woke up in a state of adrenaline-fueled combativeness, swinging her free hand as hard as she could for the probable face of her attacker while she was still trying to blink the sleep out of her eyes.

Jonathan Healy caught her arm in mid-swing. Alice went very still, staring at her father.

“Alice Enid Healy, what do you think you’re doing?” he asked, and his voice was low and tight and cold.

Thomas, standing near the door with Enid and Alexander, winced a little. “I didn’t intend to get her into trouble,” he said.

“That, too, is something Alice manages nicely on her own,” said Enid. There was some sympathy in her tone, at least, and she didn’t take her eyes off of her granddaughter. “Thank you for making sure she got back to us safely.”

“It was the least I could do,” said Thomas.

Alice tried to pull away from her father. “Daddy, you’re hurting me,” she said.

“How do you think I felt when you didn’t come home from school?” he demanded. “How do you think I felt when this stranger, this Covenant stranger, showed up at the front door saying he had you asleep in his living room?”

“Covenant?” echoed Alice, eyes going wide. She looked past Jonathan to Thomas, and the expression of betrayal on her face was so profound that she winced again, almost recoiling. “He’s not Covenant. He just bought the old Parrish Place.”

“So he could spy on us,” said Jonathan, finally letting go of her wrists. “This is what wandering away gets you. You could have been captured, or worse, taken back to Europe before we even knew that you were gone. Come along. We’re going home.”

“I suppose that means it’s time for us to leave,” said Enid.

“Don’t be a stranger, Mr. Price,” said Alexander.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” said Thomas, still feeling faintly thrown by what he’d just witnessed. The girl’s fear when she heard that he was Covenant…

Jonathan brushed past, with Alice trailing behind, muddy and miserable. She paused long enough to say, shyly, “Thank you for letting me sleep on your couch.” Then she was gone, following her father out into the night. Alexander and Enid went after them, heading for the car parked at the end of the
driveway.

Thomas watched them drive away. Then, still frowning to himself, he shut the door. They were never going to trust him, and he was never going to see that girl again if her father had anything to say about it; that much was perfectly clear.

For however long Michigan was his home, he was going to be a very lonely man.

Alice rode with her head resting against the car window, barely listening to her father as he ranted about her disobedience and lack of a survival instinct. She kept thinking about that nice Mr. Price, all alone back at the old Parrish Place. Sure, he was Covenant, but nobody was perfect in this world. And he had lovely eyes. He beat acid-spitting salamanders cold, that was for certain.

The car rolled on through the night as Alice closed her eyes and started dreaming something new.