

# Black-Eyed Kids

A short story

By Donnie Light

Copyright 2017 Donnie Light

***July 13, 1990***

Jonah was driving. Jonah *always* drove when he was in the car.

Hugh McLane didn't mind. Riding shotgun allowed him to watch the sides of the road with a keen eye. He kept his eyes on the place where the headlights faded to darkness along the gravel shoulder and down into the shallow ditches. He brushed back his mop of red hair and concentrated on his task.

The Rough Riders had a lead.

"Talk to me, Paige," Jonah said. He glanced into the rearview mirror and caught Paige's eyes. She glanced downward.

"There should be a road coming up on your right," she said. "It goes toward the river." Paige held a small flashlight on a road atlas which lit her from below, casting eerie shadows on her face. She struggled with a Henderson County map, hoping it would reveal the name of the road.

They had just left the small village of Lomax, Illinois, behind them as they drove slowly south. Lomax was just a stone's-throw from the Mississippi River. It was a small town with big worries during heavy spring rains when The Big Muddy began to swell, challenging its containment.

"Deidra, you got anything?" Jonah asked.

"Yes," Deidra said. "But it was stronger in town." She looked at Hugh as she spoke. "But I think it's important to talk to these people."

Jonah turned right onto a gravel road. The loose stones hit the underside of the car sounding like an unrehearsed bell choir.

"Who would live out here?" Paige asked as she scanned the dismal surroundings.

"We're about to find out," Jonah said. "I see a light up ahead. The woman said they were the only house on this road." He looked at Hugh. "You ready?"

Hugh nodded and tapped his waistband.

"There's nothing here," Deidra said. "But something *has* been here. The signal is growing old, decaying."

“Stay on your toes, just in case,” Jonah said.

There were often sudden surprises in their line of work.

Jonah pulled into what passed for a driveway in these parts — a dusty pair of ruts with slender weeds growing between them. The headlights swept past a rusty, red tractor that was being swallowed by weeds and woody brush.

A small house lay just ahead. The warm glow of incandescent lights spilled out the windows onto a sagging front porch that spanned the width of the house. A dog bellowed, followed by a second. They came from under the porch, howling in alarm.

“Those dogs sound big,” Hugh said. He looked into the back seat at Paige and Deidra. “Stay in the car until I say.”

“No problem,” Paige said.

Jonah cut the engine on the Chevy Malibu. The car shuddered as the engine died. All eyes focused on the house.

A man stepped onto the porch, silhouetted by the light coming through the screen door. His shadow fell in a long slender pattern onto the overgrown yard.

Hugh had his window down. A fat moth came in the window, attracted by the dome light. Two large dogs barked in a non-threatening way, their tails wagging.

“The dogs won’t bite,” the man called.

Hugh opened his door. A large, black and tan head excitedly sniffed Hugh’s leg. Hugh gave it a pat before gently pushing the beast away.

The man was halfway to the car, approaching from Jonah’s side. Jonah cranked the window down. “Are you Bill Hastings?” Jonah asked.

“Yessir,” the man said. He was tall and lanky. He wore a Cardinals baseball cap over salt-and-pepper hair that hung down almost to his shoulders. He extended a hand to Jonah who gave it a shake through the window.

The back door opened and Deidra stepped out. Paige slid over and stepped out behind her, while Hugh waded through the pair of coon dogs that wanted his full attention.

Jonah got out of the car as a woman stepped up to the screen door at the house. She looked out at the group, but stayed inside.

“We talked to the Sheriff,” Jonah said. “I think your wife talked to Paige on the phone.”

Paige stepped up and shook Bill Hastings’ hand. She introduced Hugh and Deidra.

“C’mon up to the house,” Bill said. “The wife’s still a bit stirred up by this.” He tilted his head toward the woman at the door. “But she’ll talk to you.”

The group followed Bill to the porch. They all gathered outside the door, under a single overhead bulb.

"This here is Wanda," Bill said, waving a hand toward his wife.

Wanda gave a strained smile. The door screeched as she pushed it open. Wanda was a petite woman who appeared to be in her late forties. She was wearing jeans and a Grateful Dead t-shirt. Her hair was pulled back in a tight pony-tail.

"Hi Wanda, I'm Paige. We spoke on..."

"They weren't from this earth," Wanda interrupted. "The sheriff thinks I'm nuts," but Bill saw them too." She looked at her husband who was nodding his head. "He didn't see them like I did, though. He didn't look into their eyes." She stared at the floor for a second. "I wish I had never looked into those eyes."

Deidra stepped up to Wanda and put a gentle hand on her shoulder. "We believe you," she told Wanda. "Others have seen them as well."

Wanda gently bit her lower lip. "Do the others ever sleep again?" she asked. "Because I swear to God, I didn't sleep a wink after they left. I can't imagine ever getting a good night's sleep again."

"Tell me what happened," Deidra coaxed. "Sit down and start at the beginning."

Wanda took a seat on a threadbare sofa. She took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "We had the hounds in the house," she said. "It had been raining a little, so I let them in to stay dry."

The very hounds she spoke of both stood at the door looking through the screen.

"I'm just watching Johnny Carson, when one of the dogs went to whimpering." She looked at Deidra, then to Hugh. "These dogs don't whimper," she said. "Until last night, that is." She paused a moment. "So Jake is lying there on the rug whimpering like he was hurt, and I hear Jasper pawing at the back door like he wants to go out. These dogs don't ever go out that back door," she said. "Wasn't a minute later there came a knock on *that* door." She pointed where the two dogs stood with their tongues hanging out.

"I about jumped out of my skin," Wanda said, now clearly fidgeting. "We don't get many people back here near the backwaters, and *never* anyone when Johnny Carson is on the TV late at night." She looked over to Jonah. "You'd have to know this place is here to find it," she said. "Nobody who broke down on the highway is gonna come back here looking for help."

Jonah gave her a *makes sense* nod of his head.

"As soon as I heard that knock, I got weak. Like the life had just run out of me. I didn't want to open the door," Wanda said. "But I swear, I was on my feet and headed for the door before I

even knew what I was doing. My hands were shaking when I reached for that knob, then I pulled back. I got control of myself is what I did. I yelled through the door; *who is it?*"

Everyone in the room — as well as the dogs outside — listened to Wanda recall the events of the previous night.

"It took a few seconds, but then I hear this voice. It was a small voice, weak and thin as dishwater. '*We need help*' the voice said. '*We're lost. Can we come in?*' It sent shivers down my back on a hot summer night in July. I don't know why, but I felt like I should run. I turned to see if the hounds were behind me, but they'd run off — just like I wanted to do." She looked Deidra in the eyes. "I was torn is what I was," Wanda said. "It sounded like some little kid on my porch late at night claiming they were lost. I wanted to help them, I truly did, but I was so damn *scared* of what was out there. The parts just didn't add up."

Wanda coughed and took a drink of what looked to be iced tea. She then lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. "I turned on the porch light, then reached for that doorknob and turned it. That door seemed to open on its own after I turned the knob. I stood there and saw two..." She took another drag on the cigarette. "They looked like kids, but they weren't. My God, their eyes were black as ink. Their faces were pale — almost as white as a sheet of paper."

The hand holding Wanda's cigarette was shaking, sending a wavy stream of smoke into the air above the glowing ember.

"I backed away from them, tripping over the rug. There was nothing between them and me but that flimsy screen door." Wanda tapped the ash off her cigarette. "It was about then that Bill came out of the bedroom wondering why the hounds were in the closet."

"I saw 'em," Bill said. "It was only for a few seconds, but damn... it was just like Wanda said."

"I was on my backside," Wanda continued. "They started saying, '*Let us in. Let us in. Let us in.*' Over and over, they said it. I was on my ass, but I kicked that door shut so hard it rocked the house."

"Did they go away then?" Paige asked.

"Not right away," Bill said. "We could hear them moving on the porch. Then they started tapping on that window." He pointed to a double-hung window to the right of the door.

"They got angry," Wanda said. "They kept tapping and shouting, '*let us in!*'"

"But they never tried to force their way in?" Hugh asked. He walked over to the window. The sash was raised, exposing a simple screen. "They never tried to lift this screen?"

Both Bill and Wanda were shaking their heads.

"Bill ran and fetched one of his coon guns," Wanda said. "I don't know if they were watching, but it got quiet after that."

"The sheriff sent out a deputy," Bill said. "He didn't see anything on his way back here. They weren't on the road as he came in. It seems they might have headed back toward the river bottoms." He gave the group a long stare. "That ain't no place for a couple of kids at night."

"Tell me about the kids," Deidra said. "How old were they? Boys or girls?"

"The bigger one was a girl," Wanda said. "I would guess about fourteen or so. The little one was a boy, the size of an eight-year-old." She crushed her cigarette into an ashtray. "They weren't kids I'm telling you. They just *looked* like kids. There wasn't any kid behind those black eyes. I swear it."

"Were they wearing normal clothes?" Jonah asked.

"The girl was wearing a sweatsuit," Wanda said. "It was dark-colored, maybe black. I don't remember the details. The boy had on a pair of jeans and a pullover shirt. He had on dirty, white sneakers. I remember that."

Deidra looked at Jonah and began tapping the side of her head. She passed him an urgent look.

He returned a look of understanding to Deidra. "We have to get going," Jonah said as he glanced back at Deidra. She had her eyes closed and her head bent down. "We have heard of things like this," Jonah offered. "But I've never known of a case where the kids came back a second time." He looked at Wanda. "You should be okay now."

"What are you going to do?" Bill asked.

"We're going to find those kids," Jonah said. "Try to get some answers." He looked at Deidra, who seemed to be in a light trance. "We might have another lead on the kid's whereabouts."

"My guess is that you will never see them again," Hugh said. "But take normal precautions. Keep the doors locked and the windows shut." He closed the window beside the door.

Jonah pulled a small spiral notebook out of his pocket. "Call this number if you see anything else, or if you remember something we should know," he said as he scribbled on the pad. "We can always come back."

"I hope to God that's not necessary," Wanda said. "I pray those things never show up in these parts again."

Jonah handed her the paper.

The Rough Riders said goodbye to the Hastings as the coon hounds bellowed and walked beside them, their tails wagging. Hugh playfully wrestled with one as he got into the car.

Jonah managed to point the car back toward the road as he maneuvered between piles of junk and old farming equipment.

"What's happening?" Hugh asked Deidra. He turned in his seat to face her.

"A signal," Deidra said. "It's strong."

"Back toward town?" Jonah asked.

Deidra turned her head back and forth, then pointed. "That way," she said. "It's like they just emerged..."

"I've got them too," Paige said. "It's a weird sensation."

Deidra agreed with Paige. "It's definitely something not from around here."

"By *around here*, do you mean this *world*, or this *neighborhood*?" Hugh asked.

Paige just gave him a concerned look, which was answer enough.

Jonah stepped on the gas. A sign on the side of the road stated that the town of Lomax was only a mile ahead. The clock on the dashboard read 10:47 pm.

It was full dark and cloudy as the group entered Lomax. The moon peeked through broken dark clouds that moved gently overhead. Lomax was a small village with a few houses scattered along the main street. There was a bar on one corner with a few cars and pickups in the parking lot. Faint music drifted out the open doors.

Everything else in the town looked to be closed. A few electronic signs lit the sidewalks, but the storefront windows were dark.

It only took a minute to drive past the main part of town. The Malibu was soon heading back into the darkness of the river bottoms.

"Deidra?" Jonah prompted.

"Go back," Deidra said.

Jonah executed a u-turn on the two-lane road and headed back to Lomax.

They reached the bar, which seemed the only place in town that showed signs of life.

"Turn left," Paige said.

Jonah hit the brakes and made a sharp turn at the tavern. The road ahead quickly fell into darkness, lit only by the headlights. A few small homes and mature trees lined the quiet street.

"Well?" Jonah asked.

"Look!" Hugh shouted. He pointed through the windshield.

Jonah slowed the car.

Two children walked on the side of the road. One was taller than the other. Deidra and Paige shifted in the back seat so they could see between Jonah and Hugh. As they got closer, they saw that the tall one was a girl with long dark hair. Her face was tilted downward. She was dressed just as Wanda had described. The girl was holding the hand of the smaller child who wore jeans and dirty-white sneakers.

The boy looked up as the car drove past.

“Holy shit, Mother of God,” Jonah said. “Did you...”

“I saw,” Hugh said. “That’s them.”

Deidra put one hand over her gaping mouth and grabbed Paige’s hand with the other. She squeezed.

“Keep calm,” Jonah said. “They were heading toward the main drag. I’ll circle around...”

Jonah turned the car at the next intersection, and again at the next block. They emerged on the main street, a block away from where the kids were headed. He pulled into the parking lot of a closed feed store.

“Hugh, we need to split up,” Jonah said. “I don’t want us all in the car if they approach us. We don’t know enough about them. I want you on foot, following along — discretely.” Jonah gave Hugh a sidelong glance. “Just in case.”

“I hear you,” Hugh said.

“Deidra’s with you.” Jonah glanced over his shoulder into the back seat. “You okay with that?”

“Yes,” Deidra said. “If anything goes wrong and we get split up, we meet at the bar.”

Jonah huffed out a laugh. “Hell, if everything goes *right*, we still meet at the bar.”

Nobody else laughed.

“Don’t take any chances with these things,” Hugh said. “We don’t know enough about them. Heaven only knows what these creatures are.”

“The folks in *Hell* might know more about them,” Jonah said. “I think they might come from that neighborhood.”

Hugh glanced down the street. “They just rounded the corner,” he said. He and Deidra got out of the car. Paige moved to the shotgun position.

“No shooting unless it’s to save your lives,” Hugh said through the car window. “We don’t need the law showing up.”

“Gotcha, Hoss,” Jonah said. “You mind yourselves, and try to keep us in sight, while you keep yourselves out of sight.”

“Will do,” Hugh said. He and Deidra shuffled around the corner of the darkened store and into an alleyway that lead to the back. Hugh gave Jonah a thumbs-up, and the Malibu drove down the street, toward the two strange kids.

“Follow me,” Hugh said to Deidra. He ducked and dashed across the alley to the next building, an older two-story that now looked empty. He peeked around the corner of the building and watched as the Malibu parked on the side of the main street. Jonah cut the headlights, but the running lights were on and the engine was idling.

“I see them,” Hugh said.

Deidra peeked over Hugh's shoulder.

The two kids were standing near the corner, under one of the streetlights in the center of town. They were still holding hands. Summer bugs swarmed the streetlight above them.

Hugh could see the silhouettes of Jonah and Paige in the car. Country music drifted from the bar. The fishy smell of the nearby river permeated the still, night air.

"They're walking toward the car," Deidra whispered. The two kids approached the car on the opposite side of the street. The taller one — the girl — kept her head down. The boy just stared ahead, allowing the girl to pull him along, a half-step behind her. They moved on the sidewalk until they were right across from the Malibu, then they paused. The girl turned to the boy, who looked up at her. They stood there for a moment. They may have been talking, but they used no hand gestures or body language. After a moment, the girl stepped into the street, dragging the boy along with her.

They crossed to the Malibu, but walked past it, as if they were simply moving to the other side of the street. They stopped just behind the car and moved under a canvas awning over the doorway of a thrift shop. The two stood there, as if watching the car.

The kids had their backs to Hugh and Deidra.

Hugh grabbed Deidra's hand and tugged her into action. The pair stayed in the shadows as they hunched and ran to a used car lot. They ducked behind a gray Ford pickup, then eased between two cars that faced the main road. Hugh dropped to one knee while Deidra squatted behind him.

The kids were less than half a block away, still looking at the Malibu.

Headlights flashed across the street ahead of the Malibu as someone left the bar. The car turned and came toward the kids, who turned their backs to it and stood in the shadows. After the car passed and headed out of town, Deidra gripped Hugh's upper-arm.

He looked at her. She tilted her head toward the kids. They were moving toward the street. They walked behind the Malibu, then approached the driver's door.

The girl tapped on the driver's window.

Hugh saw the shadows of both heads inside the car turn toward the girl.

"Can you give us a ride?" the girl said through the glass. "I need to get my brother home."

Hugh saw Paige's figure scoot away from the driver. The driver's window went down about an inch.

"Please, let us in," the girl said.

Hugh heard Jonah's voice. It sounded weak. He couldn't make out the words. He heard Paige yell something.



“Let us in!” the girl shouted.

The boy joined her. “Let us in!” Their voices joined in chorus for three full verses;

*Let us in! Let us in! Let us in!*

Hugh heard the Malibu’s engine rev up. The brake lights flashed brightly, turning the road bright red behind the vehicle. Then tires squealed as the Malibu shot forward.

Hugh stood up. He didn’t know what had happened, but Jonah Harker didn’t spook easily. The Malibu swerved onto the street and shot past the bar. Hugh was staring at the kids, who stood in the road watching the car speed away.

The girl turned and looked directly at Hugh, as if she had sensed his presence. Deidra was still crouching between the used cars. Hugh reached for her. He took her by the arm and raised her up.

The kids were walking toward them, slowly.

Hugh stepped in front of Deidra as the two kids approached. Their faces were in shadows, but there was something...

The girl looked up. The sign from the used car lot cast enough light on her face that Hugh could see... those eyes.

The girl’s eyes were glistening black orbs. They were soulless, dark pits of unfathomable depth.

The boy looked at Hugh with those same inky-black spheres of darkness. Even with his face in darkness, the boy’s eyes were darker than the shadows.

Hugh’s heart rate bumped up a few notches. A light sweat broke out on his brow. He put his hand on the butt of his gun and took a step back as the kids approached.

Their gaits were methodical, as if they had to think through each step. Hugh noticed one of the girl’s shoes was untied, the laces flowing and dirty as they trailed along the ground.

“Who are you?” Hugh asked. His voice was cracking with the stress these two creatures brought on him. “What do you want?”

The two stopped, staring directly at Hugh with those disturbing eyes.

“We’re cold,” the girl said. “We need a ride. Can you take us home?”

The night was warm, but Hugh believed the girl. Her face was pale in the diffused streetlights of Lomax. Her obsidian eyes gave Hugh a chill that reached his core. The two needed a ride. They wanted to go home. They wanted to be warm again. How could anyone deny them that simple request?

“Hugh, it’s some kind of mind control,” Deidra whispered. She stepped out from behind Hugh and stared at the two black-eyed kids.

The kids responded by taking a step back. The girl's mouth opened, hanging slack for a moment. She opened those hideous eyes to an impossible degree, focused directly on Deidra. Those eyes were now almost double the size they had been.

The boy did the same.

Deidra moaned.

In a moment of clarity, Hugh reached for his gun. Something was happening between the kids and Deidra. Hugh sensed Deidra's pain. She whimpered. *They were hurting her.*

Hugh intended to pull his weapon, but his arms felt as if they were moving through cold molasses. He struggled with his own body, as if he were on the verge of some kind of paralysis. He felt his grip tighten on his Glock, but pulling it from his waistband was like pulling Excalibur from its stone. Everything slowed down. Everything was heavy. The air was suppressingly thick.

"Deidra?" It was all Hugh could manage to say. He turned slowly toward her. Her eyes were locked in a stare that seemed to take all her effort to maintain. Her face shone like glazed porcelain under the streetlights. A look of determined resolve settled into her being, her visage locked on the two creatures, her eyes stabbing them with intent.

Something happened. A rush of air broke free. Dust and small debris rose up from the ground in a shockwave. Deidra's hair swirled into her face, but her gaze never wavered from the black-eyed kids.

Something had broken.

Hugh pulled his gun, his hand shaking and weak.

The girl turned, dragging the boy by the arm. The pair ran into the shadow of a building.

Hugh was still stunned, but he couldn't let them go. He dashed after the pair.

"Hugh, no!" Deidra shouted. Her arms were wrapped around her torso, as if she had been punched in the gut. She saw Hugh round the corner and disappear into shadows. She glanced up the street. There was no sign of the Malibu.

Deidra followed the path Hugh had taken, wishing he had stayed with her. She had gotten a sense of these things, and she was afraid.

She spotted Hugh turning a corner under a streetlight, his gun held out in front of him.

She raced to follow.

When she reached the streetlight where she had last seen Hugh, she stopped at a the sight of something in the street.

A shoe.

She picked it up, the ends of the laces dirty and frayed. She had seen this sneaker before. It belonged to the black-eyed girl. She looked around, finding herself behind an old, two-story brick building.

She saw motion.

It was Hugh.

He waved his arm for her to follow.

"They went in there," Hugh said. He was panting. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand, his gun clamped tightly in the other.

The building appeared to be abandoned. A weathered entry door hung askew by only the top hinge. Hugh pulled a small flashlight out of his back pocket. The beam broke the darkness, casting animated shadows on the walls inside the door as Hugh brought the light and the gun into position.

Hugh could see the doubt and anxiety on Deidra's delicate face. "We may not get another chance," he whispered.

"I could live with that," Deidra said. "But I agree. We need to know more about them."

Hugh nodded.

The doorway led to a set of stairs that went into a basement. The stairs were made of wood, old and worn smooth by decades of use. Dead leaves littered the steps, along with some papers and other trash. Cobwebs clung delicately to the limestone wall on one side of the stairs. On the other side of the stairs was only darkness.

Hugh descended two or three steps, shining his light downward. When he got just below the ceiling, he swept the light into the gloom. Deidra crowded him, trying to get low enough to see around him.

The flashlight beam exposed the larger part of the dark space.

Hugh gasped.

Deidra pouted, clasping a hand over her mouth to stifle a cry.

In the back corner of the basement, a crowd of black-eyed kids huddled together. There must have been a dozen girls and a dozen boys. They all stared up into the light with those black eyes absorbing the flashlight beam like a collection of black holes.

More disturbing than the throng of black-eyed kids, was that each boy and each girl were the same as all the others. It was the same two faces, multiplied over and over. They were all dressed exactly the same, their faces bearing the same blank expression.

Hugh noticed that the girl closest to him had one difference from the others — she was missing a shoe.

“Who are you?” Hugh managed to say. His mouth didn’t want to work as he stared at the sight below him. “Why are you here?”

The kids made no move. They gazed back into the light with their faces upturned. Hugh saw faint traces of veins just below their pale skin. In unison, the kids put their focus on Deidra.

“They are here to collect,” Deidra whispered.

“Collect *what*?” Hugh asked.

Deidra remained silent for a moment. She seemed to have made some connection with the posse of kids standing on the littered cement floor.

“Experience,” Deidra finally said. “Information, knowledge, experience. Those words keep coming to me.”

“What should I do?”

“Don’t do anything,” Deidra whispered. “Let me try...”

The kids broke eye contact with Deidra. They looked into each other’s faces for a second or two. In unison, each kid bolted in a different direction, scattering like an intrusion of cockroaches.

Hugh descended two more steps before Deidra grabbed his arm. They were both acting on instinct, unsure of what to do. Noises were heard from every corner of the dark basement as the kids dove into the shadows. Not a single one could be seen from the stairs.

All became quiet.

Dust motes floated in the flashlight beam.

Hugh and Deidra descended to the floor, sweeping the light in all directions.

“They’re not here,” Deidra said. She put her fingers to her temples and bowed her head.

“There’s just a weak signal that’s fading to nothing... as if it’s being... shielded.”

Hugh glanced around the basement. The foundation was made of limestone. “They were physical beings,” Hugh said. “They stirred up dust, they made noise. They had to go somewhere.”

“Two were physical,” Deidra said. “The others were some kind of projection, created by the originals. They were just a distraction.”

Hugh was walking toward a back wall.

Deidra stayed close.

There was old junk scattered around the basement. Dilapidated furniture and store fixtures, boxes that were sagging and rotted. Hugh found a narrow hallway formed out of limestone. He explored the short hallway with his light.

“Look,” Hugh said.

At the end of the hallway was a dark opening. There was no cement floor in this area, just dirt. The opening was narrow and only four feet high. A piece of heavy timber lay slanted in the opening, just beyond the entrance. It appeared to be some kind of tunnel that went beyond the reach of Hugh's flashlight.

"Looks like something from the Underground Railroad," Deidra said.

"The building looks to be old enough," Hugh replied. "No telling where that goes."

Hugh was still moving closer, then aimed his light on the floor. He held steady for a moment.

Deidra glanced at the place on the floor, then looked at Hugh.

The light exposed a single, bare footprint in the dirt. It was clear and crisp.

\*\*\*

Jonah was leaning on the front fender of the Malibu when Hugh and Deidra got to the bar parking lot.

"Thank God!" Paige said. She rushed to meet the pair, wrapping an arm around Deidra.

Jonah glanced at his watch, then took another drag from his Marlboro. "Another five minutes and we were gonna start searching," he said. "I see you're still in one piece... and still on this plane of existence."

"We think they went into a tunnel," Hugh said. He began explaining their experience with the black-eyed kids to Jonah and Paige. "Deidra can tell you more."

"Bee colonies send out scouts to explore the area and bring information back to the hive regarding the location of food sources," Deidra said. "When these scout bees return, they do a little dance that tells the others where to go to find food." She looked at Jonah. "I think that's basically what these black-eyed kids are doing," she said. "They come here and gather information. They said they were here to *collect*."

"You think those two are doing some kind of dance on the other side?" Jonah asked with a grin. "I'm kidding, of course... but not totally."

"Why do they insist on getting into people's houses?" Paige asked. "And they *ask* to come in."

"I think they believe that's how we do it," Deidra said. "They are trying to imitate us, do what we do, say what we would say."

"Well, they're creepy as all hell," Jonah said. "When they came up to the car, I could tell they were changing my *thoughts*. Like trying to make me say *yes* when my mind was screaming *no!*"

"It's some form of mind control," Deidra said. "I could feel it."

Hugh was nodding his head.

“Jordan’s gonna want to hear about this,” Jonah said. “I should call him, let him know we’re okay and all.” He looked again at his watch. “The bar’s open for another hour,” he said. “I already checked.”

Nobody said anything. Paige raised an eyebrow.

“What? They have a phone inside. I already checked that too,” Jonah said. “I know we have to debrief and all, but if anybody hears us talking, they will just think we’re already drunk.”

Paige looked at Deidra who was clenching something in her hand. “What have you got there?” she asked.

Deidra held out a dirty canvas sneaker. “I found it on the street,” she said. “It belonged to the girl.” She held it out. “I forgot I was holding it this whole time.” She turned it over.

On the sole of the shoe, marked in broad strokes from a black marker, were three letters;

***BEK.***

