

First Prologue

July 1, 1979

High in the belfry of the Deliverance Tabernacle, a nest hung like a papier-mâché piñata, filled not with sweets but with teeming danger, abuzz in the summer heat.

A single wasp escaped and set off through the brutal sunlight, driven by some higher instinct. It crossed the narrow country road below and descended to the wrought-iron fence that separated the living from the dead.

Zippering between tombstones engraved with names of those long gone, the wasp careened toward a throng of mourners gathered under the blazing afternoon sun around an open grave—the last available plot in the old cemetery.

“Jesus said, ‘I am the resurrection and the life,’” the rotund minister intoned. He mopped his glistening forehead with a handkerchief and continued, raising his voice above the drone of cicadas and the lowing of cattle from surrounding pastures. “‘He who believes in Me, though he may die, yet shall he live. And whosoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?’”

A young woman clothed in her Sunday best stood apart from her husband, who stared off at the forested hills in the

distance. She cradled a six-month-old infant in her arms. The boy patted her face and grasped for her glasses. She captured his hand as she listened to the big preacher, once the minister of her church across the road when it had been the Annastasis Creek Evangelical United Brethren Church, where her grandfather, Elijah Turner, was a faithful member until his death three days ago.

“And Martha said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.’”

The wasp circled the group of family and friends collected around the gleaming casket that lay deep in the fresh-dug hole. The insect dipped and dodged the stoic and the weeping, searching for a place to alight. Elijah Turner’s widow, dressed in black, waved the wasp from before her veil, and it moved on to pester another mourner.

“Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.”

Behind the young mother stood Pastor Uriah Zalmon, a tall, wiry man in a pin-striped suit. He rested his hand on her shoulder. She was a new member of his flock at the Pentecostal church across the road. Zalmon’s gaze strayed to the back corner of the cemetery, where just outside the fence a gnarled apple tree stood, beneath whose dying branches lay a mounded grave. The grave of an outcast.

The baby grabbed Zalmon’s finger, drawing his attention away from troubling thoughts. The child peered at him innocently. Zalmon smiled and stroked the boy’s head but stopped to clap at an invading insect. He missed his mark, and the wasp veered off. People turned and frowned at him.

“So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: Death is swallowed up in victory.”

On that otherwise still and sweltering day, a gust tore through the graveyard, carrying the cloying scent of lilacs. It lifted the wasp and carried it to its destination—the baby’s soft, bare heel.

“O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory? The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law.”

Stung, the infant shrieked and pitched in his mother’s arms, causing heads again to turn.

The pastor in the pin-striped suit scowled and raised his finger to shush the screaming child but failed to complete the gesture. Struck as if by unseen lightning, Zalmon threw up his arms, arched his back, and dropped to the grass, gabbling loudly in an unknown tongue. Now every gaze fixed upon his fit of ecstasy.

The officiating minister slapped his plump hand down on the fluttering Bible page and finished his text above the commotion: “But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!”

The wasp darted off toward the church.

Between a towering lilac bush and the only mausoleum in the churchyard hovered the ghostly form of an old woman cloaked in white. She watched and listened to the strange committal service as if from a distant dream in some other realm. No one saw her there except the baby, who in that instant ceased its squalling. He pointed a chubby finger at her; she met his curious gaze and immediately dematerialized.

The mourners dispersed, brushing dirt from their hands, leaving Reverend Zalmon lying on the grass, attended by the elders of his church and the woman holding the infant.

The heavy retired pastor looked on, his mouth set in a hard, dour line, and then said, “Fill in the grave...”

Get the complete book now at
<https://leeallenhoward.com>.



#TheCovenantSacrifice #LeeAllenHoward
#LGBTQhorror #GayRomance
#CultHorror #ReligiousHorror #FolkHorror
#OccultHorror #DarkFiction

