

During the winter of 1927–28 officials of the Federal government made a strange and secret investigation of certain conditions in the ancient Massachusetts seaport of Innsmouth. . . . news-followers. . . wondered at the prodigious number of arrests, the abnormally large force of men used in making them, and the secrecy surrounding the disposal of the prisoners. No trials, or even definite charges, were reported; nor were any of the captives seen thereafter in the regular gaols of the nation. There were vague statements about disease and concentration camps, and later about dispersal in various naval and military prisons, but nothing positive ever developed.

“The Shadow Over Innsmouth” · H. P. Lovecraft (1936)

• THE SAME DEEP WATERS AS YOU •
Brian Hodge

They were down to the last leg of the trip, miles of iron-gray ocean skimming three hundred feet below the helicopter, and she was regretting ever having said yes. The rocky coastline of northern Washington slid out from beneath them and there they were, suspended over a sea as forbidding as the day itself. If they crashed, the water would claim them for its own long before anyone could find them.

Kerry had never warmed to the sea—now less than ever.

Had saying no even been an option? *The Department of Homeland Security would like to enlist your help as a consultant*, was what the pitch boiled down to, and the pair who’d come to her door yesterday looked genetically incapable of processing the word no. They couldn’t tell her what. They couldn’t tell her where. They could only tell her to dress warm. Better be ready for rain, too.

The sole scenario Kerry could think of was that someone wanted her insights into a more intuitive way to train dogs, maybe. Or something a little more out there, something to do with birds, dolphins, apes, horses . . . a plan that some questionable genius had devised to exploit some animal

ability that they wanted to know how to tap. She'd been less compelled by the appeal to patriotism than simply wanting to make whatever they were doing go as well as possible for the animals.

But this? No one could ever have imagined this.

The island began to waver into view through the film of rain that streaked and jittered along the window, a triangular patch of uninviting rocks and evergreens and secrecy. They were down there.

Since before her parents were born, they'd always been down there.

It had begun before dawn: an uncomfortably silent car ride from her ranch to the airport in Missoula, a flight across Montana and Washington, touchdown at Sea-Tac, and the helicopter the rest of the way. Just before this final leg of the journey was the point they took her phone from her and searched her bag. Straight off the plane and fresh on the tarmac, bypassing the terminal entirely, Kerry was turned over to a man who introduced himself as Colonel Daniel Escovedo and said he was in charge of the facility they were going to.

"You'll be dealing exclusively with me from now on," he told her. His brown scalp was speckled with rain. If his hair were any shorter, you wouldn't have been able to say he had hair at all. "Are you having fun yet?"

"Not really, no." So far, this had been like agreeing to her own kidnapping.

They were strapped in and back in the air in minutes, just the two of them in the passenger cabin, knee-to-knee in facing seats.

"There's been a lot of haggling about how much to tell you," Escovedo said as she watched the ground fall away again. "Anyone who gets involved with this, in any capacity, they're working on a need-to-know basis. If it's not relevant to the job they're doing, then they just don't know. Or what they think they know isn't necessarily the truth, but it's enough to satisfy them."

Kerry studied him as he spoke. He was older than she first thought, maybe in his mid-fifties, with a decade and a half on her, but he had the lightly lined face of someone who didn't smile much. He would still be a terror in his seventies. You could just tell.

"What ultimately got decided for you is full disclosure. Which is to say, you'll know as much as I do. You're not going to know what you're looking for, or whether or not it's relevant, if you've got no context for it. But here's

the first thing you need to wrap your head around: What you're going to see, most of the last fifteen presidents haven't been aware of."

She felt a plunge in her stomach as distinct as if their altitude had plummeted. "How is that possible? If he's the commander-in-chief, doesn't he . . .?"

Escovedo shook his head. "Need-to-know. There are security levels above the office of president. Politicians come and go. Career military and intelligence, we stick around."

"And I'm none of the above."

It was quickly getting frightening, this inner circle business. If she'd ever thought she would feel privileged, privy to something so hidden, now she knew better. There really were things you didn't want to know, because the privilege came with too much of a cost.

"Sometimes exceptions have to made," he said, then didn't even blink at the next part. "And I really wish there was a nicer way to tell you this, but if you divulge any of what you see, you'll want to think very hard about that first. Do that, and it's going to ruin your life. First, nobody's going to believe you anyway. All it will do is make you a laughingstock. Before long, you'll lose your TV show. You'll lose credibility in what a lot of people see as a fringe field anyway. Beyond that . . . do I even need to go beyond that?"

Tabby—that was her first thought. Only thought, really. They would try to see that Tabitha was taken from her. The custody fight three years ago had been bruising enough, Mason doing his about-face on what he'd once found so beguiling about her, now trying to use it as a weapon, to make her seem unfit, unstable. *She talks to animals, your honor. She thinks they talk back.*

"I'm just the messenger," Colonel Escovedo said. "Okay?"

She wished she were better at conversations like this. Conversations in general. Oh, to not be intimidated by this. Oh, to look him in the eye and leave no doubt that he'd have to do better than that to scare her. To have just the right words to make him feel smaller, like the bully he was.

"I'm assuming you've heard of Guantanamo Bay in Cuba? What it's for?"

"Yes," she said in a hush. Okay, this was the ultimate threat. Say the wrong thing and she'd disappear from Montana, or Los Angeles, and reappear there, in the prison where there was no timetable for getting out. Just her and 160-odd suspected terrorists.

His eyes crinkled, almost a smile. “Try not to look so horrified. The threat part, that ended before I mentioned Gitmo.”

Had it been that obvious? How nice she could amuse him this fine, rainy day.

“Where we’re going is an older version of Guantanamo Bay,” Escovedo went on.

“It’s the home of the most long-term enemy combatants ever held in U.S. custody.”

“How long is long-term?”

“They’ve been detained since 1928.”

She had to let that sink in. And was beyond guessing what she could bring to the table. Animals, that was her thing, it had always been her thing. Not P.O.W.s, least of all those whose capture dated back to the decade after the First World War.

“Are you sure you have the right person?” she asked.

“Kerry Larimer. Star of *The Animal Whisperer*, a modest but consistent hit on the Discovery Channel, currently shooting its fourth season. Which you got after gaining a reputation as a behavioral specialist for rich people’s exotic pets. You *look* like her.”

“Okay, then.” Surrender. They knew who they wanted. “How many prisoners?” From that long ago, it was a wonder there were any left at all.

“Sixty-three.”

Everything about this kept slithering out of her grasp. “They’d be over a hundred years old by now. What possible danger could they pose? How could anyone justify—”

The colonel raised a hand. “It sounds appalling, I agree. But what you need to understand from this point forward is that, regardless of how or when they were born, it’s doubtful that they’re still human.”

He pulled an iPad from his valise and handed it over, and here, finally, was the tipping point when the world forever changed. One photo, that was all it took. There were more—she must’ve flipped through a dozen—but really, the first one had been enough. Of course it wasn’t human. It was a travesty of human. All the others were just evolutionary insult upon injury.

“What you see there is what you get,” he said. “Have you ever heard of a town in Massachusetts called Innsmouth?”

Kerry shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“No reason you should’ve. It’s a little pisshole seaport whose best days were already behind it by the time of the Civil War. In the winter of 1927-28, there was a series of raids there, jointly conducted by the FBI and U.S. Army, with naval support. Officially—remember, this was during Prohibition—it was to shut down bootlegging operations bringing whiskey down the coast from Canada. The truth . . .” He took back the iPad from her nerveless fingers. “Nothing explains the truth better than seeing it with your own eyes.”

“You can’t talk to them. That’s what this is about, isn’t it?” she said. “You can’t communicate with them, and you think I can.”

Escovedo smiled, and until now, she didn’t think he had it in him. “It must be true about you, then. You’re psychic after all.”

“Is it that they can’t talk, or won’t?”

“That’s never been satisfactorily determined,” he said. “The ones who still looked more or less human when they were taken prisoner, they could, and did. But they didn’t stay that way. Human, I mean. That’s the way this mutation works.” He tapped the iPad. “What you saw there is the result of decades of change. Most of them were brought in like that already. The rest eventually got there. And the changes go more than skin deep. Their throats are different now. On the inside. Maybe this keeps them from speaking in a way that you and I would find intelligible, or maybe it doesn’t but they’re really consistent about pretending it does, because they’re all on the same page. They do communicate with each other, that’s a given. They’ve been recorded extensively doing that, and the sounds have been analyzed to exhaustion, and the consensus is that these sounds have their own syntax. The same way bird songs do. Just not as nice to listen to.”

“If they’ve been under your roof all this time, they’ve spent almost a century away from whatever culture they had where they came from. All that would be gone now, wouldn’t it? The world’s changed so much since then they wouldn’t even recognize it,” she said. “You’re not doing science. You’re doing national security. What I don’t understand is why it’s so important to communicate with them after all this time.”

“All those changes you’re talking about, that stops at the seashore. Drop them in the ocean and they’d feel right at home.” He zipped the iPad back into his valise. “Whatever they might’ve had to say in 1928, that doesn’t matter. Or ’48, or ’88. It’s what we need to know *now* that’s created a sense of urgency.”