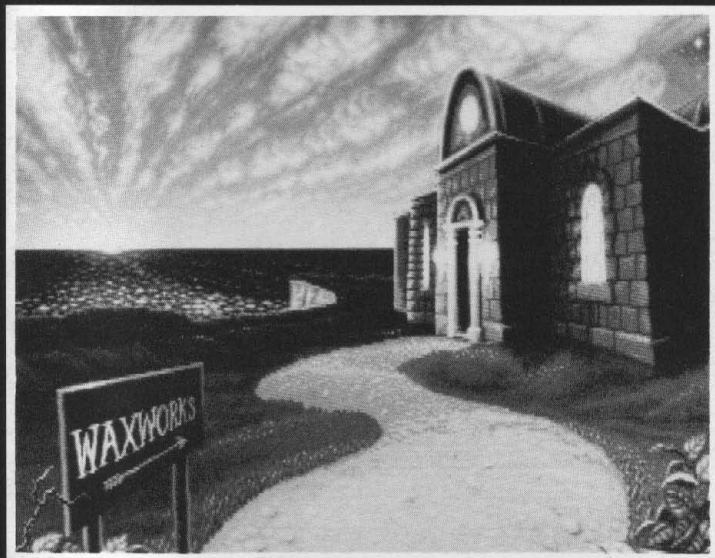


THE CURSE OF THE TWINS

INCLUDING UNCLE BORIS' LETTER



Written by Richard Moran

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The Curse of the Twins

Your life changed the day Uncle Boris was buried. The omens were bad right from the start of that cold, wet morning. You'd been up all night on a red-eye flight, dreading this your first visit back to your birthplace since your twin brother Alex had disappeared so many years ago.

You'd been a teenager the day Alex and you had gone off to explore one of the myriad dank tunnels that honey-combed the earth under Vista Forge, the coastal mining community where you were born. A cloud of bats had suddenly swarmed out of a side shaft, knocking the flashlight out of your hand. When you finally found the light and turned it back on, Alex was gone.

A week-long search by the police and fifty volunteers had failed to find your brother. He had simply vanished, as if the earth had swallowed him whole. Yet, deep in your heart, you had never been able to accept Alex's death. Like all identical twins, there was an invisible chord between you and your brother, a bond formed in the womb that acted as a conduit of feelings and emotions between you.

Growing up, you'd felt the pain whenever Alex hurt himself, and the paralyzing fear the time he locked himself in an old refrigerator. That link between you hadn't been broken, and sometimes in bed at night you would smell a musty odor, or taste something strange in your mouth, and you wondered...you wondered.

There was another odd physical manifestation you were convinced was somehow linked to Alex. Often, just before you

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drifted off to sleep, you would suddenly have a very strong mental image of your brother and at that moment your toes would curl down under toward your heels so violently that your feet still hurt in the morning.

The streets were slick and puddled from the rain as you drove your rented car away from the airport. You glanced at your watch and realized you'd be late for the service at the cemetery. Memories flooded back as you drove through town. It seemed like nothing in Vista Forge had changed; same houses, same storefronts, same dispirited looks on the faces of the people on the sidewalks. Even the trees and bushes looked like they hadn't grown an inch since you'd left.

Nearing the storm lashed coast, you caught sight of Uncle Boris' eerie stone mansion set on a cliff overlooking the pounding surf. The house had been built over a yawning sea cave and you remembered the rumors that the wave-swept cavity was connected to the mine tunnels further inland.

Even from a distance, the house had a weird look about it, a spooky aura that reflected the man who'd owned it. Uncle Boris had always been strange. He had a macabre fascination with everything evil, from torture devices to mass murderers. So obsessed was he with the demoniac netherworld that he'd converted his lonely home into a Waxworks filled with witches, monsters and evil beings.

Not long after Uncle Boris began his Waxworks, word began to spread through Vista Forge of horrible screams coming from the stone house, and fishermen spreading their nets offshore swore they saw monstrous shapes passing the lighted windows at night. Everyone in the community gave the Waxworks a wide berth, and after one visit not even your parents would go near the ghoulish mansion.

Once, you and Alex had played hookey from school and a delighted Uncle Boris had given you a tour of the creepy

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chambers. You had shuddered at the sight of Jack the Ripper and the Egyptian mummy and other fiendish exhibits. Yet Alex had been both fascinated and fearless, and almost every week after that he would sneak over to the Waxworks and spend hours alone with Uncle Boris' collection of monsters.

After Alex disappeared, your parents were afraid the tunnels under Vista Forge would claim you too. They sold their house, vowing never to return, and the three of you moved far away.

By the time you got to the cemetery, the rain was coming down in cold, slanting sheets, running in rivulets between the gravestones. You were the last one to arrive, and the little knot of people at the grave site threw you accusing looks, obviously put out you'd kept them waiting in the downpour.

There was no other family member there to say goodbye to Uncle Boris, only two unshaven grave diggers in oilcloth rain-slickers and a stoop shouldered minister who continuously coughed deep in his chest and wiped his dripping nose with a sopping, threadbare handkerchief.

The pasty-faced minister droned through a brief prayer and had hardly said Amen before the grave diggers were pulling out the planks holding the casket over the grave. The wet ropes slipped quickly through their hands as they lowered the coffin into the ground.

Suddenly a blinding flash stabbed down from the sky and a lightning bolt split open an old oak tree only yards up the slope. Startled witless, the grave diggers let loose the ropes and Uncle Boris' coffin plunged into the rectangular pit.

As the coffin hit bottom, a tremendous clap of thunder shook the graveyard, echoing madly off the rain-streaked walls of the surrounding mausoleums. Before the echo of the thunder died away a nauseous slurping sound burst from the

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grave, as if the water in a huge sink were being sucked down a tunnel-sized drain. The sickening sound grew louder and louder, and now you could feel the ground trembling beneath your feet.

The grave diggers stared down into the hole in disbelief, their faces masks of revulsion and fear. Then they turned and ran, sliding and falling as they disappeared into the pelting rain. The minister stood there dumbfounded, his mouth open as you stepped carefully up to the side of the grave and peered down at the coffin.

Only there wasn't any coffin. The bottom of the pit was empty. Where the rectangular walls ended, a funnel shaped hole descended down into a black void. Like Alex, Uncle Boris had been swallowed up by the earth.

Then, you couldn't be sure, but you thought you saw movement far below. The next moment there was a face in the dark gloom. Your face! For an instant you thought you were going mad. Was there a mirror down there in the muddy pit? Then your throat constricted and you couldn't breathe as you realized you weren't seeing a reflection of your face but a replica.

"Alex!" you screamed, an instant before the face vanished again.

Confused and frightened now, you staggered back away from the grave. The minister had disappeared. Drenched to the skin, your head splitting, you trudged off through the rain toward the cemetery office.

When you got there the director was waiting, and the pale faced grave diggers were throwing back shots of whiskey in the corner. The bald, black-suited director wrung his bony hands as he apologized for the terrible incident. He knew this would happen some day, he said, wetting his dry lips, for like most of

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Vista Forge the ground beneath the cemetery was a labyrinth of mine tunnels and shafts. A cave-in was inevitable. He promised to send some men down into the grave pit as soon as the rain stopped. They'd rebury Uncle Boris at the cemetery's expense.

The explanation seemed logical, but still the grotesque incident had unnerved you. When you mumbled that you'd seen a face in the grave, a face like yours, the director had shrugged and said you'd undoubtedly seen your own face reflected back by a puddle down below. You clung to his explanation. A water reflection, of course, why hadn't you thought of that. That had to be it.

By the time you reached the motel where you'd reserved a room, you weren't sure what had happened. All you knew was that you wanted out of Vista Forge. Fast. Your first impulse was to fly home immediately. But then, after a fitful hour of indecision, you decided you'd stay over for the night. You were scheduled to attend a reading of Uncle Boris' will at an attorney's office the next morning, and in his last letter the eccentric old gentleman had written that you were to inherit his entire estate.

Nightmares plagued your sleep that night, terrible visions of the animated corpses of Alex and Uncle Boris wandering the perpetually dark tunnels below Vista Forge, their putrefying flesh scaling off their faces in rancid slabs.

At 3 a.m. you gave up on sleep and lay there in your hotel bed thinking, remembering. You recalled Uncle Boris' one and only visit to your home several years after you'd moved away from Vista Forge.

When Uncle Boris walked in the door that day long ago, he'd stared at you for several long moments without saying a

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word. Then, when your parents were both off in the kitchen, he'd suddenly turned and told you how much you looked like Alex. The remark had unnerved you for Alex was dead, had been for years by then.

Shortly afterwards, you'd all sat down to dinner. The talk had gradually shifted to the family history. Your ancestors on your mother's side had come from a tiny village in Walachia, a Rumanian province deep in the Transylvanian Alps. It was a region where werewolves and vampires were said to roam the countryside on moonless nights, and peasants feared nothing more than an evil curse.

Your mother had tried to shift the conversation, but Uncle Boris insisted on telling of the legend of Ixona, a dark family secret for centuries past. During the barbarous days of the Middle Ages, he said, one of your ancestors had caught an old witch named Ixona stealing chickens from his farm. As punishment, he had cut off the screaming hag's right hand with an ax.

Lying in the dirt of the farmyard, the ragged crone had drawn a crystal ball from beneath her blood-caked cloak and set it in the dust before her. "In every family there is dormant evil waiting to be awakened," she'd said in an agonized voice. "For spilling my blood, I shall call forth an ancient curse to poison yours."

Your ancestor had brought up his ax to finish off the hag, but his pregnant wife had stayed his arm, terrified that killing the crone would rain evil down upon both of them.

Her face twisted in agony, the witch had stared into the murky depths of the glass globe before her. "Two thousand years ago one of your Egyptian ancestors had twin boys. One was good, but the other was cursed by an evil pharaoh and turned into a monster."

The witch had struggled to her feet, hate raging in her

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bloodshot eyes as she clutched the crystal ball against her. "I call upon the curse of the Pharaoh to return. Once more, in every generation in which your family bears twins, one shall belong to Beelzebub."

The farmer's wife screamed in fright for the village midwife had told her she would have twins. Your ancestor had tried to smash the crystal ball with his ax but the witch had whirled out of reach and quickly fled to the safety of the nearby dark woods.

Soon afterward the farmer's wife gave birth to twin sons. One, Druet, grew up to be a decent hardworking farmer, but the other, Vladimir, was corrupt and lusted after money and power. As the witch's evil curse took hold of him, it was said, his feet became cloven and he was forced to wear special boots to walk

Gathering the miscreants of the province, Vladimir pilaged neighboring villages, and gradually gathered an army of cruel mercenaries around him. In 1448 he seized the throne of Walachia and instituted a reign of terror as Vlad IV.

One of his first acts as prince was to send out his army to find the old witch who had cursed his family. She was thrown into the dungeon and repeatedly tortured, but she refused to lift the curse. Infuriated, Vlad had her impaled on a stake driven into the bottom of a swamp outside his walls. In the two days it took the old hag to die, the bog's snakes and snapping turtles stripped the living flesh from her body bite by small bite.

In the years that followed, Vlad had his enemies in Walachia tortured to death, and then ordered their bodies impaled on stakes at the borders of his kingdom. History was to know him as Vlad the Impaler, one of the bloodiest tyrants ever to rule on the earth.

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The curse of Ixona persisted down through the centuries and whenever twins were born into your family one took to evil ways. It was said one twin was the head torturer during the Spanish Inquisition, another was rumored to be the Marquis de Sade and a female twin was burned at the stake during the Salem witch trials.

When Uncle Boris finished his story, your mother looked at you and paled, for, though Alex was gone, you too were a twin. Uncle Boris saw her look and reached across the table to pat her hand reassuringly. She wasn't to worry, he'd said, for he'd found the way to finally lift Ixona's curse from the family.

Uncle Boris leaned back in his chair and went on. As they all knew, he had built a Waxworks with recreations of some of history's most fiendish murderers and monsters. He had purposely surrounded himself with these demonic characters for he was convinced that by immersing himself totally in evil he could come to understand the sinister forces loose on earth, and thus know better how to lift Ixona's curse.

And it had worked. One night, staring at the wax face of Vlad the Impaler, he'd had a vision of a dark bog pocked with broken masonry blocks. He'd flown to Walachia and within days had located the swamp he'd dreamt of close beside the north wall of the ruined castle. He'd hired workmen to drain the marsh and when the water receded there, sticking out of the muddy bottom, was the skeleton of a woman impaled on an oak stake.

An iron box was hung around her neck with a chain, and in the box was the crystal ball Ixona had used to curse the family 600 years before.

Uncle Boris explained that he had only begun to understand the powers of the ancient glass sphere. It would take him years, but eventually, he promised, he would find a way to

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lift Ixona's curse. That family dinner was the last time you'd seen Uncle Boris alive.

At 7 a.m. the phone rang. It was the cemetery director. As soon as it was light that morning he'd sent men down into the grave to retrieve Uncle Boris' body. Just as he'd suspected, there was a mine tunnel under the grave site. They found the casket in the dark passage. The director hesitated. He didn't know quite how to tell you this, but the coffin had been smashed open. The body was gone. He had no explanation.

Without a word, you hung up the phone, feeling a sudden compulsion to go down into the tunnels yourself. You would go in the same entrance you and Alex had used the day he'd disappeared years before.

You bought a lantern at the local hardware store and forty-five minutes later you entered the old mine. You could tell by the thick spider webs and undisturbed dust that no one had been in there in years. The light soon faded, along with the hum of traffic from the nearby interstate. The only sound now was the dripping of water leaking in from yesterday's rain and the whistling of the wind through the narrow passages.

Several minutes later you reached the spot where Alex had disappeared. All of a sudden, you could feel his presence, like warm breath on the back of your neck. As you swung the light around to search the gloom, the beam revealed what looked like a pile of dry sticks protruding from the dust of the tunnel floor.

You knelt to pick one up and realized with a start that these weren't sticks but bones. Bat bones! How strange, you thought, that so many bats would die in exactly the same spot. Then something about one of the bones made you look more closely. Your heart began to beat wildly. There were teeth marks on the bone. Human teeth marks!

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There was another heap of bat bones nearby. And most of them, you could see, showed clear signs that someone had butchered and eaten the animals. Suddenly your eye caught something glistening beneath a thin layer of dust. You bent and brushed away the powder, then yanked back your hand in horror. It was a fresh fishhead, the remains of one of the saltwater fish that found their way into the tunnels from the distant sea cave.

A sickly sweat coursed from your pores as you turned quickly for the entrance, looking back over your shoulder every few paces. Halfway back, a side tunnel led off to the right and you noticed fresh tracks in the dust. They hadn't been there when you came in, you were sure of that.

You swept the light over the tracks and froze. They were the imprints of cloven feet! You knew now. Someone — something — was living in the tunnel, eating bats and fish to survive. You ran as fast as you could back down the tunnel and out into the light.

On the way to the lawyer's office, you couldn't shake the feeling of horror that gripped you. Who could be living in the tunnels? Who but...Alex.

The lawyer looked the part, a tall gray haired man in a pin-striped suit surrounded by lawbooks. Being the executor of Uncle Boris' estate would net him only a small fee and he looked profoundly bored. You were the sole heir, the attorney said, something you already knew, and Uncle Boris had left you all his holdings. There was a small bank account, a ten year old Dodge, and, of course, the Waxworks. Finally, there was a sealed envelope from your uncle that contained a letter and the keys to his eerie mansion.

The attorney volunteered to handle the sale of the Waxworks, which he assumed you'd want to dispose of as soon as

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possible. It was an unsavory place, the lawyer said, though he'd never been inside. The stories about the Waxworks, he added, kept most people from visiting the chilling mansion. If it were up to him, he'd tear the place down and sell the land to developers.

You thanked the attorney and left, the envelope from Uncle Boris in your coat pocket. Back at the hotel, you decided to read the letter later and tossed it on the dresser. You called the airline and reserved a seat on the six o'clock plane, then changed into a coat and tie for the trip home. As you were knotting your tie in the mirror, your eye strayed to the envelope and curiosity got the better of you.

Sitting down on the bed, you slit the seal, took out the keys to the Waxworks, and then unfolded your uncle's letter.

"My Dear Sister's Child," the letter began. "What you will read in these pages will shock you, and you will feel revulsion and horror at what you learn. Yet, I must tell you all, for now that I have gone over to the other side you are the only one on earth who can stop the evil that is to come.

"You must know first that your twin brother is alive. Yes, all these years he has dwelt in the tunnels beneath Vista Forge, emerging from his dark lair only at night. He was preordained from birth to come under the curse of the ancient witch Ixona and that day he disappeared he was taken by the forces of evil. Now, he belongs to the dark side and does the bidding of Beelzebub. You must neither hate nor blame him, for his will is not his own.

"It is still not too late to save your twin, to free his tortured soul from the evil curse that grips and drives him. Yet, do not deceive yourself that his salvation will be easy. He will fight you with the ferocity of Beelzebub himself, and he has terrible powers undreamed of by sane minds.

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"You see, your brother has been given dominion over the demons of the past. His unholy mission is to use his nefarious powers to resurrect the evil beings that have tortured and murdered through history. Unless you stop him, innocent men, women and children will fall prey to these fiends and monsters, and the entire world will inexorably come under the control of his zombie slaves.

"I will help you all I can, appearing to you from the swirling mists within Ixona's crystal ball. You must waste no time. Go to the Waxworks at once. But go prepared for a journey through the supernatural, a trip back through time. You will be surrounded by evil, beset by fiends, yet you must not falter. Your brother's salvation and the fate of the world is now in your hands.

Uncle Boris."

Slowly you put down the letter, your mind reeling. The suspicion, the feeling you'd had all these years is true. Your twin brother's alive! But in what form? True, he has a face, you saw that in the bottom of the grave, and it was like looking in the mirror. But what about the rest of him. You shudder at the thought of the cloven footprints in the mine tunnel.

An overpowering urge to flee comes over you. All you can think of is getting on that plane and leaving Vista Forge and the Waxworks and your cloven-footed brother as far behind you as possible. Yet, you know you can't leave. You've inherited the Waxworks, and with it the terrible mandate handed down to you by Uncle Boris.

With dread in your heart, you put on your coat and drive slowly toward the Waxworks. The rain has returned and your heartbeat seems to synchronize with the rhythmic sound of the wiper blades thumping back and forth across the windshield.

It's dusk when you reach the Waxworks. As you park your

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car, a lightning bolt pierces the rapidly darkening sky and the air feels charged with electricity. The clap of thunder that follows is even louder than yesterday's booming storm over the cemetery.

As you walk toward the door of the eerie mansion you know Alex is somewhere inside. And with him, his zombie slaves, the most evil cast of murderous monsters ever to walk the face of the earth.

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