PRAISE FOR
CARNIVAL OF FEAR

“JG Faherty’s CARNIVAL OF FEAR takes us into a world where survival of the fittest is a gross understatement and fear is the norm. In this page-turning novel, Faherty goes about proving once and for all that hell does exist—and you needn’t be dead to find it. It finds you. A must read!”

--Deborah LeBlanc, author of THE WOLVEN and WATER WITCH

“CARNIVAL OF FEAR is a runaway freight train barreling across the genre landscape. Aliens, demons, werewolves, vampires, and zombies...this bad boy has them all! The prose is as sharp as a freshly stropped razor, the cast of characters true-to-life, and with The Proprietor, Faherty has created the kind of evil that seeps through the pages. JG Faherty grabs the reader by the throat and never lets go.”

--Michael McBride, author of IMMUN3 and INNOCENTS LOST

“CARNIVAL OF FEAR is deftly crafted and populated with characters you can believe in and root for, making their fear your fear. Now roll up, roll up and experience the terror and exhilaration because you’re in for one hell of a ride.”

--Shaun Jeffrey, author of THE KULT and DEADFALL

“CARNIVAL OF FEAR is aptly named--Faherty takes us on an outrageous journey into nightmare that's equal parts Bradbury and Barker. From the opening page, this one rips into high-gear and takes you on a funhouse ride you'll never forget.”

--Thomas F. Monteleone, Stoker Award-winning author of more than 36 novels and several anthologies

---

“As a person who loves Carnivals, Haunted Houses, Halloween, and Horror, this book has everything I could hope for! No matter what time of year it is, this book will transport you to a cold October night filled with fun and fear!”

--Richard Christy, Sirius, XM Radio

CARNIVAL OF FEAR

By JG Faherty



Graveside Tales

CARNIVAL OF FEAR

Published by Graveside Tales

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address Graveside Tales, P.O. Box
487 Lakeside, AZ 85929, USA
www.gravesidetales.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and incidents are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or events is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2010 JG Faherty
Cover Art © 2010 Steven Gilberts
www.stevengilberts.com/

FIRST EDITION
ISBN: 978-0-9801338-9-9
ISBN: 0-9801338-9-0

Acknowledgements

No book is created in a vacuum. They take months out of your life, time you could conceivably be spending with the family, earning money, relaxing, or sleeping. So I want to say thank you to my wife, Andrea, for putting up with the hurricane that is my office and for promoting me to everyone she knows. Similar thanks go to my parents, who instilled a love of reading and writing in me at an early age, and always let me stay up to watch the scary movies.

A very special thank-you goes out to Deborah LeBlanc, who helped me hone the final draft that you're about to read. She opened my eyes to my own shortcomings as a writer and helped me grow within my craft. Likewise, this book would never have reached print if it wasn't for everything I learned at the Borderlands Writers Bootcamp, where the first draft of Carnival of Fear was effectively deconstructed by Thomas F. Monteleone, Jack Ketchum, Thomas Tessier, Ginjer Buchanan, and all my classmates from the novel class of 2006. All your help and wisdom is much appreciated!

I'd also like to thank several writers who've been friends, advisors, and second pairs of eyes not only for this book, but throughout my writing career: Michael McBride, F. Paul Wilson, David Morrell, Peter Straub, Shaun Jeffrey, Brian Keene, Daniel Waters, Hank Schwaeble, Lee Thomas, Rick Hautula, Kathy Ptacek, Jeanne Cavelos, Elizabeth Blue, Wrath James White, Monica O'Rourke, and Gina Osnovich.

To Myrrym Davies, thank you for your edits and for making the editing process a breeze; to Dale Murphy and the whole team at Graveside Tales, thank you for believing in this book.

Although I've said it in public before, I have to say it again: Steven Gilberts, your cover art rocks! As always, you went beyond my expectations to produce a magnificently chilling cover!

Finally, a shout out to Matt Schwartz and all the folks at Shocklines.

Thanks also to Harley and Buffy, for providing me with so many entertaining writing breaks (woof!) and to Ramon the Killer Bull from Hell for inspiration.

JG Faherty, Oct. 2010

CARNIVAL OF FEAR

PROLOGUE

Shortly before midnight on October twenty-ninth, with a full moon riding high overhead, a strange occurrence took place on the one-lane road near the east pasture of Dan McCready's farm.

An ink-black circle, barely visible against the night sky, appeared without a sound. Twenty feet in diameter, the vertical disk shimmered with a disquieting energy on a wavelength not friendly to the human eye. Twin lights appeared within its dark depths, followed by a rumbling, clattering noise. Moments later, an eighteen-wheeler rocketed from the otherworldly tunnel. With a horrendous squeal of air brakes, it slowed down and turned onto the unpaved lane paralleling Dan McCready's east field. Then it turned again, this time into the field itself. Several other trucks followed, their spectral emergence leading the way for a caravan of pickups, SUVs, and mobile homes. Gothic lettering on the sides of the trucks spelled out *Carnival of Fear* in giant, blood red script.

As soon as the last vehicle exited, the supernatural ring disappeared without a sound.

In the field, the vehicles arranged themselves in a rough circle several hundred yards across, as if forming a modern-day wagon circle. Once the last truck parked, all engine noise ceased. The sudden quiet was absolute; the type of quiet where the only audible sound is the soft background buzz that lets you know the nerves in your ears are on standby. No *tic-tic-tic* of engines cooling in the chill October air. No sound of truck doors opening or closing. In the cabs, no tiny, glowing red lights gave evidence of drivers smoking cigarettes.

Within the circle, a wispy, roiling cloud of fog began to form. The mist thickened, swirling about itself and building like cotton candy; solidifying, condensing, and growing more opaque with each passing second.

Shards of the heavy fog broke away and assumed individual shapes, featureless at first, but growing more recognizable as additional cloud matter attached itself. Squares and rectangles, circles standing on edge. Something large and triangular.

The shapes drifted about the field to various locations. As more vapor coalesced, their size and definition improved. True outlines became identifiable. The triangle morphed into a tent-form that grew into a circus big top. The squares and rectangles formed concession stands and game booths. The circles mutated into rides, the Ferris wheel and merry-go-round rapidly expanding to full size. In the very center of the ghostly midway, the largest aggregation of mist took on the form of a castle two stories high. Towers and turrets, tiny, rectangular windows, even a drawbridge.

When no more wandering mist remained, a burst of blackness erupted from the center of the circle, a silent explosion of lightlessness that, for the space of one heartbeat, covered the entire field in a shroud of unholy energy. In his living room, Dan McReady slumped in his easy chair, a victim of too much beer and the nightly news. When the force wave of darkness washed over him, tearing the flesh from his bones and ripping his soul away, it happened so fast he never even awoke.

He would be one of the lucky ones.

When normal light returned, a carnival stood revealed. Rides, booths, the big top, all of it colored in vivid oranges, yellows, reds, blacks, and browns to proclaim the official arrival of Halloween.

Rising above the other structures, the Castle of Horrors stood as the centerpiece of the midway. A sign, written in crimson, dripping letters, pronounced 'Terror! Blood! Mayhem! Monsters, Ghouls, and Murderers! Experience the agony of the damned!' A second sign proclaimed 'The World's Most Terrifying Haunted Mansion! Enter At Your Own Risk!'

In the unnatural quiet, the Carnival of Fear waited.

Soon it would be time to feed.

SECTION I: The Carnival Comes To Town

CHAPTER 1

"Hey, Amy, wait up."

Amy Cherry turned at the sound of JD's voice and waited for her boyfriend to catch up to her. He trotted across the fading October grass, his lean, athletic body evident even under his baggy jeans and overlarge t-shirt. His limp didn't seem so pronounced, a side effect of the unusually warm October weather blessing Whitebridge and the surrounding area recently.

They'd been going out since June, but it still seemed so new to her, so different than the two years she'd spent with Ricky. If only she'd realized sooner how special JD was, the last year or two could've been a lot better.

"Hi, Ames," JD said as he reached her. Before she could say anything, he wrapped his arms around her and planted a full, hard kiss on her lips.

"Wow, to what do I owe the pleasure?" Amy took hold of his hand as they walked to their favorite lunch spot. Soon the New York weather would turn nasty, ending lunches on the school lawn for the year. But today was sunny and pushing seventy, a perfect day for ham sandwiches, Doritos, and sodas under the stately elm that towered over the picnic tables behind Whitebridge High School.

"Change of plans for tonight," JD said. "Freddy called me a little while ago. There's a Halloween carnival in town."

JD loved Halloween, and for the past three weeks he'd been obsessing over which parties to go to and what costume to wear.

"A Halloween carnival? What's that?"

Amy opened a diet soda and took a sip. Halloween wasn't tops on her list of holidays, but JD's enthusiasm had won her over. She'd even gone and bought a costume—the "Sexy Witch," with emphasis on the 'sexy'—her first since middle school. The long, black dress with the deep v-neck molded nicely to her thin frame, and the color contrasted well with her shoulder-length auburn hair. She planned to surprise JD with it on Saturday night.

The look on his face would be priceless.

"From what Freddy said, it's kind of like a Renaissance festival, but devoted to Halloween. Besides the regular carnival rides, they've got a haunted hayride, a freak show, a wax museum, and some kind of haunted mansion." JD mumbled the last words around a big bite of sandwich.

"One of those things where you walk through and people jump out and scare you?" Amy forced a laugh. She hated those attractions. She always worried she'd pee her pants by accident, or worse, get groped by some perverted carnival worker.

"Better. It's like a giant castle, and the effects are supposed to be out of this world."

"How does Freddy know so much about this carnival?"

"He saw a flyer this morning. Said they're all over town."

"So, I guess we're going to this freaky fair?" Amy did her best to sound enthused.

"Ain't that sweet?" a mocking voice said from behind them. "The two lovebirds are going to the carnival."

Amy's gut clenched. Her ex, Ricky Roberts, stood there, along with Boz Zymansky.

"Hey, gimpy, you gonna do the ring toss and win her a stuffed bear?" Ricky flicked his wavy blonde hair back, an annoying gesture she remembered all too well from their time together.

JD started to say something but Amy shook her head. "Don't bother. He's just jealous. You know that."

Ricky's gray eyes bulged a little. "Jealous? Why should I be jealous?" His lips turned up in a sneer. "Gimp-boy can have my sloppy seconds if he wants."

Faster than Amy had ever seen him move, JD jumped to his feet and grabbed Ricky's red and white football jersey.

"You watch your damn mouth!"

Amy stood up and wedged her arm between them, hoping to defuse the situation before it got out of control.

"JD, don't. He's not worth it."

"You really want me to let him go?"

Amy nodded.

"Fine." JD pushed his face close to Ricky's. "But this is the last time you talk to her like that, understand? Do it again, we're gonna have problems." He let go of Ricky's shirt and backed away.

"Screw you, Cole." Ricky's face was livid. "You want to fight? Let's do it right now. I ain't afraid of you." Ricky took a step forward but a beefy arm stopped him.

"Can't let you do that," Boz said in his slow drawl. "We got some big games coming up, and if you get into a fight today you'll end up getting benched. Coach is already pissed about your grades."

Boz stood two inches shorter than Ricky, but he carried an extra thirty pounds of muscle on his wide frame. A linebacker to Ricky's quarterback, Boz's physique came from a lifetime of pounding fences and hauling slop on his father's pig farm. For the sandy-haired teen, lifting weights for football was a light workout.

Ricky lowered his fists. "Yeah, you're right. I can't screw the team just 'cause this jerk needs a fist sandwich." He pointed a finger at JD. "Just wait, Cole. This isn't over. I'll fix your crippled ass."

Ricky pushed away from Boz and strode across the quad.

Boz looked down at the ground, then back up at Amy and JD. "Sorry, guys. Ricky's a real douche, and a coward when he ain't on the field. That don't mean he ain't dangerous. Y'all should stay clear of him, 'specially if he's got some of his boys with him." His square face grew sad. "Wish it didn't have to be like this, Amy. Jeanne really misses hanging out with you."

"I miss her, too."

Jeanne DiCenzo had been Amy's best friend for three years. When the cheerleading squad, led by Ricky's new girlfriend Traci Trachsel, had voted to dump Amy, she'd turned to Jeanne for support, but her friend had let her down. Torn between staying on the team or sticking up for her friend, Jeanne hadn't had the guts to do what was right.

"Well, maybe someday we can all hang out, you know? Me and Jeanne sure are gettin' tired of Ricky and Traci's 'we're better than everyone else' attitude. I'll talk to her about it."

"That'd be nice."

Boz nodded and walked away.

Amy turned back to JD. "I'm sorry about that. Ricky is such a butthead." She sighed and sat down again. "I don't know why you're still going out with me. All I do is bring you trouble."

"Stop it," JD said. He wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close. "You can't ever get me in more trouble than I've gotten myself into over the years. Face it, you're stuck with me."

"I know. Four years of college, and then we get married, right?" They'd talked about their future so often, making their plans over late night coffees and in between make-out sessions on the couch. JD wanted to be a writer, and she wanted to be an artist.

That was another way JD had won her over. Unlike her parents, he took her desire to be an artist seriously, while they considered it a hobby. They'd even threatened to not pay for college if she decided to apply to an arts-focused school.

"That's right. We'll be starving artists together," JD said as he hugged her.

Amy laughed, and then lifted her head. "So what about tonight? Are we still going to the carnival? I mean, Ricky and the jock squad will probably be there, drunk and stupid like always. I don't want any trouble. And I don't want you getting hurt."

"Yeah, we're still going. Boz was right. Ricky's a coward. He's only tough when his friends are around." He held up three fingers. "I promise not to get into anything with him, okay? Scout's honor. Tonight will be nothing but fun. Besides, there's gonna be lots of cops there. He won't dare start anything."

He must have seen her hesitation, because he added, "C'mon, it'll be

great. We'll head over there around eight, have some greasy food, play some games. Then we can do all the spooky rides, *oooohhh*."

JD bugged his eyes out at her as he made his ghost noise.

Amy laughed. "Okay, you've convinced me. Come by around six. If my parents aren't home, maybe I'll model my Halloween costume for you."

"You got a Halloween costume? What is it?"

Keeping to her vow to surprise him, Amy shook her head and shoved a piece of sandwich in his mouth.

"If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise."

CHAPTER 2

"What gives with your boyfriend talking to Little Miss Prissy?" Traci Trachsel pointed a perfectly-manicured finger towards Boz, JD, and Amy.

Jeanne DiCenzo shrugged. "How should I know?"

"Hmph. I don't like it. Tell him to stay away from her."

"Tell him yourself."

Traci whirled around. "What's your problem?"

The auburn-haired cheerleader shrugged. "What's the big deal? She's off the team, you're dating Ricky. Why do you let Amy bother you?"

Traci frowned and then relaxed her expression. Frowning led to wrinkles.

"She doesn't bother me. I just don't like her. And I don't like my friends talking to people I don't like." She flipped her long, blonde hair back over her left shoulder, a move she'd practiced for many nights in the mirror until she had it just right. Then she picked up her books.

"Enough about Amy. Can you believe the boys are taking us to that stupid carnival tonight? What are you going to wear? Ricky said he's going to pick us up at eight..."

CHAPTER 3

Chaos reigned supreme as the carnival prepared to open. Men and women dressed in dirty jeans and flannel shirts busied themselves setting up displays, hoisting banners, and testing out rides. Many of the men had their shirts off, exposing heavily tattooed bodies and bulging muscles. Shouting voices mixed with loud music and ringing bells as booth operators tested rides and games. The first oily tendrils of buttered popcorn wafted through the air.

Brad Calhoun and Ken Jefferson, two ninth-graders who'd skipped out on classes just to arrive early, walked past the empty admission booth and into the carnival proper.

"Dude, the sign says they open at five. What if they kick us out?" Brad asked.

"That's only four hours from now," Ken said. "They won't care. We might even be able to hit some of the rides before it gets crowded."

Ken walked over to the nearest carnie, a heavy-set man hammering a tent stake into the ground. "Hey, is it okay if we look around?"

The burly man glanced up, revealing a black hole where his face should have been. Ken had time to utter a single scream before the hole expanded and the head lunged forward on a serpentine neck. Ken's body disappeared as the mutated face enveloped him like a fist capturing a bug.

Brad started to run away but long, bony fingers grasped his shoulder and turned him around.

Brad looked up.

And up.

The man towering over him wore the brightest suit Brad had ever seen. Orange pants, red jacket, yellow shirt. A wide green tie with tiny pumpkins on it. On top of the man's skinny head sat a black, old-fashioned stovepipe hat with a sunflower stuck in the brim.

The impossible figure smiled—a wide, *wide* smile that stretched from one ear to the other on his death-pale face—and Brad lost control of his bladder and bowels. Coal-black eyes glittered with mad glee.

"Welcome to my carnival, Bradley."

The Proprietor reached out with his other hand and shoved his fingers into the boy's belly, thrusting upwards, around the stomach, under the ribs, and past the lungs. The spider-like digits grabbed the furiously pumping heart and contracted, squeezing the organ to pulp.

He breathed deep, inhaling Brad's soul as it left the dying body.

The Proprietor dropped the corpse to the ground. Two carnies jumped on it, fighting with each other over the choicest parts.

A long, black forked tongue snaked out of the Proprietor's wide mouth

and flicked back and forth across his hand, cleaning away the blood. He reached up and adjusted his hat on his bald head.

"I do hope you enjoy the show, boys." The Proprietor smiled again. Overhead, a bird died in mid-flight and plummeted to the ground.

"And what a show it will be."

CHAPTER 4

The door to Dave Pellegi's bedroom flew open and Chris O'Shea charged in. "Dude, check this out."

"Whoa, shut the door, bro. My parents'll be home any minute." Dave spread his hands, indicating the bag of weed and rolling papers on his bed.

"Sorry." Chris closed the door behind him.

Dave smoothed his hands through his long, greasy, dark brown hair. "What's up?"

"There's a carnival in town. We're talking haunted houses, rides, food, and beer."

Dave twirled a joint, licking the two ends closed. "Awesome. We oughta go."

"That's not all." Chris took off his favorite baseball hat, the one with the Grateful Dead logo embroidered on the front, exposing a head full of bright red curly hair. "Zach's going, too."

"No way. I thought that girl of his didn't want him hanging out with us."

"She doesn't. But she's got a chemistry test on Monday." Chris started flipping through Dave's CDs. "We can make it a guys'night out. Tonight it's the three amigos, some weed, and a carnival full of freaks."

"Awright, dude. Party time." Dave lit up a joint and passed it to Chris.

"Man, I shouldn't. I got tests next week, too. I need to study before we go out tonight." Chris took a hit anyway and rubbed his eyes. "I wish I had a memory like yours."

"Photo-mo-graphic, bro." Dave tapped his forehead. "Someday I'm gonna get on one of those TV trivia shows and win myself a million bucks. Then it'll be the party life for me."

"Yeah, that'd be cool." Chris grabbed the TV remote and turned on the cartoon channel.

Dave's words faded into background noise as Chris focused his attention on TV, trying to follow the antics of the football-headed baby and his friend the talking dog.

Two minutes later, he was sound asleep.

CHAPTER 5

Neil Jarvis dropped his lunch tray onto the cafeteria table, the loud noise causing a few heads to turn his way.

"What's the matter?" Clifford White slid over to make room for Neil.

"Advanced Physics," Neil said, picking up his sandwich and taking an angry bite.

Across the table, Danny Chang looked up from his copy of Gaming Magazine. His short black hair stood up in gelled spikes. "Trouble with the class?"

"Mmph." A confetti of turkey, Swiss cheese, and shredded lettuce fell from his mouth, and he took a big gulp of water to wash the food down before answering.

"Not the class. Doc Santos. She made a mistake during today's lecture, and got pissed when I pointed it out. That's like the third time this year she's gotten a calculation wrong. What does it say about the education we're receiving when the students are smarter than the teachers?"

Cliff nodded, his dark scalp reflecting the cafeteria lights from beneath his short-cropped curls. "I know what you mean. The same thing happened at math camp over the summer. Our textbook was completely outdated."

Danny leaned over and nudged Neil with an elbow. "Don't look now," he whispered. "Here comes Josie."

Neil sat up straighter and brushed crumbs from his shirt.

Josie Dylan set down a tray holding two cups of yogurt and a small salad. She looked cuter than ever to Neil, wearing a blue blouse with a little bit of ruffle at the collar and a tight pair of tan chinos. A few mousy-brown strands of hair had slipped loose from their tight bun and dangled around her forehead and neck.

Neil knew most of his friends thought Josie needed to drop a few pounds and dress better, but he didn't care. She loved computers almost as much as he did. What more could he ask for in a girl?

Except maybe for her to be interested in me.

"Some class today, huh?" Josie picked up her yogurt and began spooning it into her mouth, quick little movements like a chicken pecking at grain. "You were great, Neil, the way you didn't back down when you told her she'd done that calculation wrong."

"You would've caught it too, but you were too busy staring out the window. What was so interesting, anyway?"

Josie put down her spoon, her eyes wide with excitement. "Ricky Roberts almost got into a fight with Amy Cherry's new boyfriend. Billy Zymansky had to break it up."

Neil sighed. “Are you still hung up on him? Yesterday Ricky and his friends were tearing pages from books in the library. Last week he knocked Cliff’s lunch tray onto the floor. Those guys make this school hell for everyone else.” Neil dropped his sandwich onto his plate and threw his napkin over it.

“What do you expect? They’re football players. I think they just act that way because everyone expects them to. I’ll bet when he’s alone he’s completely different.” Josie glared at Neil, a clear warning in her eyes to drop the subject.

Yeah, he’s probably an even bigger butthead. But Josie’s look kept Neil from saying anything out loud.

Cliff cleared his throat, his Adam’s apple bulging from his thin neck. “Uh, that reminds me, did you guys hear about the carnival opening tonight?” He pulled a flyer from his notebook. “Danny and I are going right after computer lab. You guys want to come?”

Neil started to object, but Josie spoke over him. “Sure. Are we wearing costumes?”

“Yeah, I’ll be Jackie Chan.” Danny held his hands out in a mock karate pose.

Cliff snorted laughter. “That’s as original as me going as Will Smith.”

“What about you?” Josie poked Neil with her spoon, leaving a dab of yogurt on his shirt.

“Forget it.” The last thing he wanted to do dress up in a costume. “Besides, it’ll be cold. You wouldn’t see a costume under a coat.”

Josie picked up her tray and stood. “Whatever. I still wanna go. Pick me up at seven.” She headed off to the garbage cans.

“Tonight could be your big chance,” Danny said to Neil. “Don’t blow it.”

Neil cleaned his shirt and finished his water, thoughts of him and Josie holding hands and eating cotton candy already swirling through his head.

Who knows? Maybe tonight my luck will change.

CHAPTER 6

As the day went by, more and more people learned about the carnival. Rarely did something unusual come to Whitebridge, so the carnival's very uniqueness made people eager to go, even those for whom such things normally held no interest.

No one questioned why there had been no previous advertisements for its arrival. In the town records, a signed and witnessed notice indicated the carnival had permission from the landowner and the town to do business. No one even considered asking Dan McCready, who enjoyed a reputation as a belligerent loner, why he'd volunteered the use of his farm.

No, the Carnival of Fear had done its job well, just as it always had throughout the centuries, appearing each year on Halloween eve, never visiting the same town twice.

Feeling the anticipation grow among the people of Whitebridge, the Proprietor chuckled softly.

Tonight is going to be simply wonderful.

Standing in the shadows of the Funhouse, he allowed his human form to take shape again as the time drew near for the carnival to open. His bright suit coalesced around his body, all reds and yellows and oranges. The colors of autumn, garishly exaggerated to distract people's attention from his seven-foot, pencil-thin frame. Just as importantly, they distracted the humans from noticing the coal-red glow in his deep-set, black-as-midnight eyes.

His scaly tongue flicked out, scenting the air, and then disappeared back into the cavernous mouth filled with row upon row of sharp, jagged teeth.

So many eager young bodies. So many delicious souls.

None of the minions will go hungry tonight.

CHAPTER 7

Traci Trachsel lay wrapped in Ricky's strong arm, eyes closed, doing her best to ignore the odors permeating his bedroom. He hadn't bothered to shower after practice, choosing to come right home and get a little action before they left for the carnival.

The sharp tang of his armpit entwined itself with the moldy scent of the dirty socks and underwear strewn across the floor. Once a week the maid gathered everything, washed it, and placed it back in his dresser drawers. In between, his room resembled a locker room more than a bedroom. Luckily for him, Traci didn't care about minor details. She had her sights set on more important things.

High school was nothing more than a four-year popularity contest, and she'd worked hard to be the winner. By getting Amy Cherry out of the picture, she'd nabbed the top prize: Ricky Roberts, star quarterback.

If I'd known Miss Prissy would fall for JD's empty wallet and ordinary Joe charm, I'd have fixed them up myself years ago.

Not that JD wouldn't be a catch, if he had a few hundred thou in the bank or a golden arm that could get his team to the state finals two years in a row. But looks and personality were distant thirds to money and status, something Amy seemed to have forgotten.

A car door slammed outside. Ricky's parents were still in Europe, so it had to be the other football players, coming over for a pre-carnival party.

Ricky started to snore. Traci debated whether to wake him up or just get in the shower. The others would be coming upstairs any minute.

As if on cue, the door to Ricky's room crashed open and Ricky's teammates barreled in.

"Bedjam!" Pat Mulroony yelled, as several large bodies landed on the bed.

"Dammit, Ricky, I told you to lock the door." Traci tried to crawl to the edge of the bed, one hand fighting a losing battle to keep a sheet pulled over her naked body.

Roused from his nap, Ricky started wrestling with MC Clark, a losing battle since MC was two hundred forty pounds of muscle on a six-foot two frame.

Caught under a pile of rock-hard arms and legs, not-so-solid bellies, and too much aftershave, Traci yelped as two large hands grabbed her, one on her left breast and the other between her legs. She turned to yell at Ricky and found herself staring directly into MC's eager face.

In that instant the world receded around her. All she saw were MC's eyes, wide and white against his dark chocolate skin. She remembered the stories,

how more than one of his relationships had ended with date rape charges and restraining orders.

"Get off me, you bastard!" Traci twisted her body and slapped MC's face as hard as she could.

MC laughed, but there was no humor in it.

Oh, crap, he likes it when they fight back.

"Lay off the goods, bro." Ricky rolled off the bed and started pulling on a pair of boxer shorts. Hector Gonzalez, known as 'Speedy' to his friends, and Mulroony got up as well.

Traci shuddered as MC tightened his grip. She glanced over at Ricky and saw only indecision in his eyes.

If he decides to rape me, Ricky won't even have the balls to stop it.

"Touch her and I'll break your arms." Boz Zymansky stepped into the room, his fists clenched and an angry look on his normally pleasant face. Jeanne DiCenzo and Chantrelle Ojeda, Speedy's long-time girlfriend, followed him in.

MC looked at Boz, then back at Traci. He pursed his lips in a kissing motion and then rolled off the bed. Traci wrapped the sheet around herself and ran to the door, standing behind Jeanne and Chantrelle.

"Hey, bro, break off. I was just foolin', ya know?" MC held up his hands in mock surrender. "She was in da bed when we jumped on. Ricky didn't say nuthin', so I figured it was cool. My bad."

Ricky poked MC in the chest with a finger. "I told you to get off her. Next time I won't give you a chance, I'll just toss you off myself."

"Whatever, dog, whatever. I ain't here to cause no trouble. I just want to party." Putting action to words, he pulled a pint of Old Grandad from his back pocket and took a long swig.

Pat Mulroony laughed and took a beer from the small refrigerator next to Ricky's desk. Speedy opened one as well and asked if they'd be serving food at the carnival.

"Assholes." Boz pushed past the girls and went back downstairs.

Jeanne and Chantrelle led Traci into the hallway. Ricky's voice followed them, laughing as he told someone to get him a beer. Traci shivered.

She found herself wondering what JD would have done if MC tried something like that with Amy.

JD would've killed him, or died trying. A hard fact that stung, but was true nevertheless.

At least it's only for a few more months. Once we graduate, I only have to stay with him until I find someone better in college.

By the time she reached the shower, she was smiling.

CHAPTER 8

In the flickering candlelight, the figures in Amy's paintings moved and shifted as if they were alive and trying to break free. JD Cole glanced around the room, careful not to move and wake Amy where she dozed next to him.

Canvases filled her bedroom. Paintings, coal and pencil drawings, rough sketches. Mounted and unmounted, stacked haphazardly against walls and furniture. Gifted and prolific, she often had six or seven pieces going at once, and when she finished one she just stacked it with the others and started working on something new.

If only she had the confidence to match her skills. At least she's finally coming out of her shell a little bit.

Relaxing against the pillows, he marveled at how far she'd come since breaking away from Ricky Roberts.

The jingling tones of his cell phone shattered JD's reverie.

"Hello? Oh, hey." He glanced at Amy, who was awake. "It's Freddy. He's on the way over." Turning back to the phone, he said, "We'll be ready in twenty. See you then."

"Time to get up?" Amy rubbed her eyes.

"Nap time's over, sweetie. Good thing, too. You were snoring like a woodchuck with a sinus condition."

"I don't snore. And if I did, I wouldn't sound like a woodchuck."

"Woodchuck, woodchuck." He made snorting noises as he teased her.

"I am not a woodchuck!"

He ducked as she swung a pillow at him, then grabbed her around the waist and tackled her onto the bed.

"Gotcha."

"No fair."

She tried to say something else, but he pressed his lips against hers, igniting a long, lingering kiss. He slid one hand down her shirt, undoing the buttons as he went.

The groaning, grinding vibration of the garage door opening froze his hand in place.

"Crap. Your parents are home." He rolled off the bed and fumbled for his shoes. "I thought you said they'd be gone all night."

"They probably got into a fight. As usual." Amy buttoned her shirt and got up to straighten the covers.

"I'll go out the back. Last thing you need is to have them find me here if they're already pissed off." He gave her a kiss and then eased open the bedroom door. "See you downstairs."

He crept down the hall and out the sliding glass doors that led to the patio.

Then he jogged around to the front to wait for Freddy, who arrived ten minutes later.

"Hey," he greeted his friend, getting into the back seat.

"What's up? Amy's parents come home early?"

"Yeah. Hit the horn, I don't feel like dealing with them tonight. Hi, Paulette."

"Hi, JD." Freddy's current girlfriend, the latest in a string of perky blondes, waved from the passenger seat.

Freddy tapped the horn twice. A moment later, Amy trotted out of the house, still zipping up her LL Bean camp coat over her favorite Bloom County sweatshirt, the one with Bill the Cat for President on it.

"Hi, everybody," she said, sliding in next to JD.

"Everything okay?" JD took her hand.

"Yeah. Except for my Mom complaining about how rude it is to honk the horn instead of coming in. They were too busy yelling at each other to get on my case about anything else."

Freddy cleared his throat. "Everybody ready for some scary creatures and haunted mansions?"

JD sent his friend a silent thank you. Freddy Perillo had been his wingman since grade school. He'd even been the one who'd carried JD to the nurse when he'd torn all the ligaments in his knee during gym class freshman year.

Without Freddy, odds were he'd be in jail by now.

"No, but I'm ready for a funnel cake and some cotton candy," Amy said with a forced laugh.

"I second that idea," Paulette responded. "I'm starved."

"Then let's get this party started." Freddy put the car in drive and hit the gas.

JD gave Amy's hand a squeeze.

Only eight more months. Then we can leave this town forever.

CHAPTER 9

The Proprietor watched from the shadows as the crowds continued pouring into the carnival. Children ran to and fro, screaming and shouting, clutching brightly colored balloons and cheap prizes. Adults hurried about, desperately trying to keep up with their children. Teenage lovers walked hand in hand, sharing cotton candy and looking for the best place to sneak away for a make out session, or maybe something more.

He breathed deep, the nostrils of his long, sharp nose flaring as he sampled the life forces moving through the carnival. Outside the Castle of Horrors, the line stretched well past the ropes, people waiting as long as an hour to experience the thrill of being scared by monsters and demons.

Soon the carnival would be strong enough to break through the final barrier between the dimensions, freeing his minions to descend upon the nearby town, gathering souls and power, so that next year it could come back even stronger.

A tempting morsel strolled by, too delicious to let pass. The Proprietor's long, multi-jointed arm snaked into the crowd and plucked the small child into the darkness. Before the boy could utter a single cry, a taloned hand covered his mouth, while its partner dug deep into soft flesh.

Four-year-old Toby Watkins had just enough time to realize his parents had lied, the monsters from his bad dreams were *real,* before multiple rows of serrated fangs tore his tender young body in half.

The Proprietor gulped down the hot blood before it could hit the ground, and then crammed the two pieces of the body into his mouth, his jaws and neck expanding easily to accommodate the food.

It took a few moments for Annabeth Watkins to realize her son wasn't next to her. "Toby? Toby Watkins, come here right now."

The Proprietor chuckled to himself as he faded back into the shadows, knowing that by the next night, Toby would be one of many listed as 'missing.'

Annabeth continued calling for her son, and the Proprietor wondered if perhaps he should arrange a reunion later that night.

After all, a mother should always have the chance to spend eternity with her child.

CHAPTER 10

Neil Jarvis kept a firm grip on his jumbo soda. Crowds of people thronged the carnival, their elbows and bodies jostling him as he and his friends wove their way through the sea of humanity.

"Tell me this isn't the greatest time since we went to that sci-fi convention in Lexington?" Cliff White asked.

In front of them, Danny Chang and Josie Dylan led the way to the next booth while they passed a big tub of popcorn back and forth. Extra grease of course, so much that the bottom of the cardboard carton dripped yellow. The thick, buttery scent gnawed at Neil's brain and made his stomach growl, but as much as he wanted to walk next to Josie, he refused all offers to join them in their snack.

Although he'd learned how to control his hunger, certain temptations were best kept at a distance. In the eighth grade, Neil had weighed in at just over two hundred pounds, with a complexion his doctors labeled as 'serious acne.' His schoolmates had more colorful descriptions, such as 'pizza face' and 'moon base Jarvis.'

After a particularly severe beating from the school bully, Neil had put himself on a crash diet. No soda, candy, starches, or second helpings. No fast food. No more of his mother's greasy chicken or home-made macaroni and cheese. Just lots of lean meats, vegetables, and fruit. In the beginning, it had been pure hell. He'd gone to bed crying because his cravings were so bad. For awhile, he'd had massive cases of the runs as his digestive system adjusted to the increased fiber. No one believed he'd stay with it, especially not his equally overweight parents, but he had.

By the end of his first year at Whitebridge High, he'd slimmed down to one hundred and sixty pounds and his acne had cleared up, although it had left behind a random pattern of divots on his cheeks. In the two years since then, he'd grown another three inches in height, reaching his current five-ten, and never gained another pound.

His metabolism had undergone major changes as well. Now he could eat anything he wanted, as much as he wanted, with two exceptions: grease and sugar. He could put away three turkey sandwiches, a bowl of pasta with broccoli, and a liter of skim milk every day and never gain any weight.

However, the smallest amount of mayonnaise, French fries, or buttered popcorn, and he'd not only be three pounds heavier the next day, but guaranteed to have five or six oversized zits on his face.

He forced his gaze from the lard-drenched tub and stared at the procession snaking back and forth in front of the Castle of Horrors. "Guys, look at that line. We should get a place now or we'll never get in."

"No way," Danny said. "It's all little kids and their parents right now. Another hour or two and they'll be gone. That's when we'll get in line."

"Sounds good to me." Josie wiped her hands on a napkin, the residue of liquid fat turning the white paper clear. "I still want to visit the fortune teller and ride the Ferris wheel. Who wants to join me?"

Images of him and Josie, alone in a car at the top of the Ferris wheel, holding hands under the moonlight, flashed through Neil's head.

"I'll go with you," he said before anyone else could respond.

"Okay, let's head over there now. Say, do you think anyone from the football team will be here tonight?"

Josie's words made Neil's stomach churn. She couldn't get her mind off Ricky Roberts, even now. He shoved hands in his jacket pockets, hiding his clenched fists.

Someday she'll see Ricky for the jerk he really is.

On the heels of that thought came another.

Who am I kidding? She's clueless when it comes to him.

Suddenly the Ferris wheel didn't seem so appealing.

CHAPTER 11

Ricky Roberts jumped out of his Ford Expedition and threw the empty pint bottle of peppermint schnapps as far across the parking area as he could. A dozen rows away, a car alarm's strident wail followed the sound of breaking glass.

"Bulls-eye!"

"Good one, man," Speedy said. "Someone's gonna have a big dent in the old family wagon tomorrow."

Boz opened the back door of the SUV and helped Jeanne out. "We just got here and they're already causing trouble," he whispered to her.

"Just ignore it. When we get inside, we can go off and do our own thing." An isolated breeze tousled her copper-colored hair and Boz pulled her into a brief embrace until the chill wind died down.

"That ain't nuthin'," MC said, "Watch this."

He turned and heaved his empty at a brand new Mercedes parked three cars away. The bottle crashed through the driver's side rear window, sending glass everywhere. A moment later, the piercing shriek of the car's alarm assaulted their ears.

"Whoa, dude. Whadja do that for?" Ricky stepped away from MC.

"Chill, a'aight?" MC shoved his hands into the pocket of his Sean John sweatshirt. "Ain't nobody gonna know it was us."

Boz grabbed Jeanne's hand. "C'mon, let's go get our tickets. I'm not getting busted with these assholes."

"What's your beef?" MC called after them. "Ain't like it's your ride."

"No, but it's somebody's," Boz said. He ignored the muttered curses that followed his words.

The carnival greeted them with a barrage of sounds, sights, and smells. Boz stood for a moment, tickets in hand, trying to make sense of the myriad options spread out in front of them.

Crowds of people milled around, moving in masses up and down the rows of attractions and standing five deep in front of the game booths. Barkers called out enticements to play Whack-A-Mole, shoot basketballs, or try their hand at ring toss.

"I want to do the games," Chantrelle said. "Speedy's gon' win me a *grande* stuffed animal." She grabbed Speedy's arm and pulled him to her. At five-foot ten, the half-French, half-Dominican beauty stood taller than any other cheerleader on the squad.

"No problem, just name the game. Darts, softballs, ring toss, I'll give 'em all a go. Nothing's too good for my *Caliente*." Speedy planted a kiss on her cheek, and then led her towards the arcade booths where carnies yelled for

people to step up and win a prize.

"How about it?" Boz asked Jeanne. "I got a few dollars to blow."

"Sure." Jeanne looked back at Traci. "You coming?"

"MC and I want to check out the Freak Show and get some chow," Ricky said before Traci could respond. "Let's go, Trace."

"I think I'll go with Chantrelle and Jeanne." Traci stepped away from him. "You can meet up with us later, if you can tear yourself away from your boyfriend."

Ricky's face turned red, and his lips tightened into a thin line. He glared at her for a moment, then his face relaxed into a mocking smile. "See you later, then."

"C'mon, nigga, let's eat." MC slapped him on the back. "Hey, lookit that fine thang over there. Ain't no stopping a couple a players like us tonight."

Boz looked at Jeanne and shook his head. "This is gonna be some night."

CHAPTER 12

Amy couldn't stop smiling. Her right hand held a candied apple, her left nested in JD's warm grip. All her senses seemed overly-alive. The brisk October air caressed her face with a million delicate fingers and the multi-colored, flashing lights created a dazzling kaleidoscope around her.

Ringing bells, sirens, and amplified voices—"Ride the Whip!" "Win the lady a prize!"—produced a wall of sound that seemed to propel her through the crowd. Hawkers shouted, children called out in fear or excitement, and everywhere people laughed and screamed. The constant barrage of sounds, smells, and sights had her slightly off-balance, but she didn't mind.

Then there was the food. Corn dogs standing at attention, blue and pink cotton candy, greasy funnel cakes, deep-fried Oreos, French fries, and other treats too exotic to identify.

Her senses threatened to overload, but she loved that about carnivals. She felt free to let herself go, be wild and uninhibited. Maybe not get-on-a-table-and-dance-in-her-bra wild, but the atmosphere, combined with JD's strong presence next to her, made her feel just a little bit crazy.

Still a bit unsteady after riding the Bobsled, she held tight to JD. She'd screamed as they'd whipped around the course, slaloming through turns so fast she'd been afraid her neck would break, or the car would fly off the rails.

Before that, it had been the Ferris wheel. JD had given the carnie a five and a wink to ensure the wheel stopped with them at the top. The cold wind stung their faces and rocked the car as he gave her a deep kiss, making it even more romantic and exciting.

For that brief time, with her hair flying behind her and her hands gripping the safety bar, she'd felt absolutely free. No worries about the future, no concerns about what her parents thought, no fear that JD would get tired of all her insecurities and leave her for someone with less baggage.

"You okay?"

She looked up. JD had a concerned look on his face as he stared at her.

She clutched his hand tighter, afraid to ruin the moment by bringing up a talk on feelings, but wanting to let him know how much she loved him. She opened her mouth to say something, but Freddy spoke first.

"Check that out." Up ahead, a long line of people stood in front of a two-story building designed to look like an ancient castle.

"That's the Castle of Horrors," JD told them. "We *have* to do that before we leave."

Frightened screams and exclamations of nervous laughter echoed from inside the building. The Castle of Horrors seemed to be delivering on its promise to be the most terrifying carnival attraction in the world.

A shiver jigged its way up and down Amy's spine as she regarded the gothic facade, with its buckets of red splashed on the walls and the realistic corpses lying on the ground around it.

That is the last *place I want to step foot in.* She gave herself a mental shake. *This is why we came here, to have fun. So why am I scared?*

"Yeah, but look at the line." Freddy jerked his thumb towards the milling crowd. "How's this sound? We grab a bite to eat, play a few games, and hit the haunted mansion in an hour or two? By then the line should be a lot shorter."

"Sounds good to me. How about you, Ames?" JD asked her.

"I want something more filling than this candy apple." She tossed the sticky fruit into a nearby garbage can. "In fact, I feel like a hamburger, French fries, and then maybe a funnel cake."

"Better watch out," JD teased, a wicked gleam in his eye. "All that food, you might yack on one of these rides."

Amy laughed along with the rest of them. "Yeah, well, if you really love me, you'll let me puke on you."

"If you really love me you'll puke on some bratty kid instead."

As they made their way towards the food stalls, Amy glanced back at the Castle of Horrors and nearly screamed. A horrible face leered down at her, its mouth open and ready to swallow her whole.

She blinked, and the face was gone, replaced by the widely-spaced windows of the top floor and the double doors of the entrance, through which a batch of shouting, laughing children were entering.

I'm going to need a beer before I go in that *place.*

Maybe two.

CHAPTER 13

Dave Pellegi stumbled out of the car and ended up on the ground. “Whoa, head rush, man.”

“Dude, first day on the new feet?” Chris said with a laugh. He held tight to the door as he stepped out, the cold October hitting him like a bucket of ice water after the smoke-filled car.

They made their way to the main gate, the hot, greasy odors of carnival food triggering Pavlovian reactions.

“Oh, man, I am so freakin’ hungry,” Dave said, holding his stomach for added effect. “And I need something to drink. My mouth feels like a litter box.”

“I’m with you. Let’s find a taco stand and munch.” Zach looked around. “Over there. Tacos, nachos, and soda. What more could you ask for?”

“The Swedish bikini team minus the bikinis?” Dave asked. His out-of-the-blue comment caused a burst of hysterical laughter among the three of them.

“I dare you to ask for that when we order our food,” Zach said, when he finally caught his breath.

“Hell, I’ll do it. Six tacos, three Mountain Dews, and a bikini babe.”

“Go for it, dude.” Chris said.

As Dave approached the taco stand window, Chris poked Zach. “Five bucks says he chickens out.”

“Another five says he gets a soda thrown in his face,” Zach said, and they both laughed.

Then the carnie came to the window and their laughter died.

“Whattaya want?”

Easily seven feet tall, the man’s body rippled with heavy muscles under his stained and yellowed sleeveless t-shirt, the kind Chris’s father liked to call ‘wife-beaters.’ Tribal tattoos covered his arms and neck, and a jagged scar carved across his left cheek, pulling the side of his mouth into a permanent grimace. A long, drooping mustache hid part of it, but the rest of the pinkish-white ridge stood out starkly against the dark brown of the man’s skin.

“Uh, s-s-six tacos and um, three sodas.” Dave kept his head down, his long hair falling in front of his face.

“Sure that’s all you want?” the giant asked. He stared at Dave for a moment, and then turned and began filling the order. His enormous, knobby fingers moved as smoothly as a concert pianist’s as he prepared the tacos and filled three oversized soda cups.

When he finished their order, he dropped the tray on the counter. Even though the noise wasn’t loud, Chris jumped, and beside him Zach sucked in a

deep breath.

"That'll be ten-fifty. Cost you more for the Swedish broads, if you still want 'em." The scar-faced carnie gave them a nasty smile, his lips twisting even further.

Dave dropped his money on the counter and hurried away with the tray.

"How'd he know what I said?" Dave asked as he sat down.

"I don't know, but he seriously creeped me out," Zach said. "I could have sworn I saw his eyes turn red for a second."

"Must have been a reflection from the lights," Dave mumbled through a mouthful of taco, oily strands of shredded lettuce hanging from his lips and staining his goatee.

"Must've been," agreed Dave, working on his own taco.

Chris didn't say anything. He'd seen the man's eyes turn red, too.

No more weed tonight. It's making me hallucinate.

After they finished, Chris stuffed the wrappers in his empty soda cup and went to throw it away. As he walked to the garbage can, he glanced at the taco stand. The tattooed vendor stood in the window, watching him. He had a hard look on his face. An angry look.

Or maybe...hungry?

The vendor nodded and licked his lips, his tongue a fat, pale slug crawling out of his mouth and back in again. His eyes flared red once more as he turned away.

"Did you guys see that?" Chris looked over at Zach and Dave.

"See what?"

"His eyes turned red again. And I think he reads minds."

"Dude, you've been watching too much SyFy channel."

Zach snorted laughter that turned into a cough as soda came out his nose. "Oh, crap, that hurts."

"Forget it. Let's get out of here." Chris walked away, not waiting to see if his friends followed.

I know what I saw.

CHAPTER 14

"C'mon, Speedy, you can do it," Jeanne DiCenzo shouted. "One more basket."

She handed her soda to Boz as Speedy cocked his elbows, preparing his shot. Chantrelle and Traci clapped their hands, joining her in cheering the lanky receiver on. He launched the ball in a perfect arc. Jeanne found herself holding her breath as the ball came back down, falling through the hoop with a soft swoosh.

"A winner! We have a winner, folks." The short, pudgy carnie pressed a button that rang a loud buzzer. "Pick your prize, anything off the top row, sonny boy."

Speedy looked at Chantrelle.

"I want the big cat, Hector, that one," she told him, pointing at a large black panther.

"One big cat for the lady," the carnie said, handing it over.

"Oh, *papi*, I knew you'd win me something nice tonight!" Chantrelle hugged the huge toy.

"Yeah, and it only cost me fifteen dollars," Speedy said, flashing a quick wink to Jeanne and Boz.

"Ooh, win me a toy, too," came mocking, falsetto tones from behind them.

The group turned to find MC and Ricky standing there. MC grabbed his crotch and leered at Chantrelle. "I'll give you a prize."

"Boy, you wish you had you some of this," Chantrelle said.

Traci and Ricky started to laugh, but stopped when MC stepped towards Chantrelle, his hand raised in the air. "You better watch yo' mouth. I'll smack yo' braids right off yo' head."

Speedy and Boz stepped in front of MC. Ricky hesitated, then joined them when Traci poked him with a finger.

"What's the matter, big boy, you can dish it out but you can't take it?" Chantrelle made a 'come on' motion with her hands. Jeanne grabbed her by the arm and pulled her away.

"Don't antagonize him, all right? Just drop it."

Jeanne had a worried moment when it looked like MC might push past everyone and come after Chantrelle, but then he backed up a step.

"Sheeit, I can take it. I'm just messin' wich y'all. You know when I be serious. Ain't none of you could stop me if I really wanted to lay my pimp hand 'cross her head."

"I think maybe you ought to ease up a little," Boz said. "We're supposed

to be having fun. Save the fighting for the game."

"Yeah? I think maybe you oughta get your bitches in line. Where I come from we don't disrespect like dat."

Chantrelle lifted her chin up. "Where *you* come from people think it's a'aight to beat on the sistas."

"Cali. Drop it." Speedy pulled her aside and whispered something in her ear. Her lips tightened, but she didn't say anything else.

MC turned his back on them and walked to the strongman's booth. He tossed three dollars at the carny and grabbed the sledge. Lifting it over his head in an easy motion, he brought it down onto the springboard with a loud *BANG*. A moment later the bell at the top dinged as the iron ball hit it.

"We have a winner!" The barker grabbed MC's arm and held it up in the air. "Look at that folks, another winner. C'mon, step up, step up, and try your luck."

The barker handed MC a six-inch long fluffy toy that might have been a lion. MC squashed it in one melon-sized fist and then tossed it into a nearby garbage bin.

"What's his deal?" Jeanne asked, as MC handed over another three dollars.

"I think he's been juicing," Boz said. "Trying to bulk up even more. Rumor has it some pro scouts are gonna be at the Syracuse game next week."

BANG! DING!

"That's a lot of pent up hostility he's got. I wouldn't want to be the next girl who turns him down."

"Or the next loser that pisses him off," Traci added, pointing to where a long-haired slacker-type had just bumped into MC.

"That's Zach Pfiester," Boz told the others. "He's part of the stoner crowd that hangs out behind the school."

"Watch where you're goin'." MC grabbed Zach by the arm and pushed him into a display of sand-filled soda bottles. Glass and bright-colored sand flew in every direction as Zach flipped over the counter and landed at the feet of the startled woman running the booth.

"Boz, maybe you better go over there."

"Naw, look, here comes a security guard."

MC had a fist pulled back to throw a punch at one of Zach's companions when the uniformed guard stepped between them.

"All right, break it up or you and your friends are outta here." The guard poked MC in the chest with a wooden nightstick while his right hand hovered over his gun.

For a moment, Jeanne thought MC might take a swing at the guard. He paused, fist in the air, eyes narrowed and nostrils flaring. Then he lowered his arm and walked away, his bald head glistening with sweat even in the chilly

night air.

The guard murmured something to the shopkeeper, warned Zach to stay out of trouble, and then sauntered away.

Jeanne shook her head. *I can't believe he's not checking to see if anyone's hurt.* In fact, the man seemed to be laughing as he walked past them, the red of the neon lights flashing in his eyes.

"C'mon, let's head over to the Castle of Horrors. The line should be shorter now." Boz linked his arm through hers and steered her away.

"Yeah." She took a deep breath. "The sooner we finish this carnival the sooner we can go home."

CHAPTER 15

"Hey, look at the time." Freddy Perillo tapped his watch. "We should head over to the Castle of Horrors."

"Let's...uh, oh." JD stopped as something caught his eye.

"What?" Freddy asked.

"Trouble." JD pointed at a nearby booth.

MC Clark looked ready to punch some poor skinny guy in an oversize army coat. To JD's surprise, a security guard broke up the fight but didn't do anything except give MC a warning. He didn't even help the kid up from the ground.

"I can't believe he didn't get thrown out," Amy said.

"Weird." Something about the guard seemed odd, but JD couldn't put his finger on it.

"Hey, that's Chris O'Shea with them," Amy said. "He's in art class with me. Let's see if they're all right."

The two couples walked over as Chris helped Zach brush red, green, and orange sand off his clothes. The short, wrinkled woman who ran the booth complained in a loud voice that Zach owed her for the merchandise he and his friends had broken with their foolish games.

"Lady, I already told you, he's no friend of mine," Zach told the leathery-faced carnie.

"So who's gonna pay for all this?" The woman pointed a gnarled finger at the mess on the ground.

"Why don't you ask the guy who hit me?"

Amy tapped Chris O'Shea on the shoulder. "Is everything okay?"

"Oh, hi, Amy. Yeah, Zach's all right."

"We saw what happened, but we were too far away to do anything,"

"Probably a good thing for you," Zach said, as he dumped multi-colored sand out of his jacket pockets. "He would've gone after you next. Him and the football Nazis."

"We were just heading over to the Castle of Horrors. Wanna come with?" Paulette asked.

"Us, too," Dave said. "Sure, we'll walk over with you. Safety in numbers, right?"

Amy smiled, and something clicked in JD's head. He realized what had spooked him about the incident. Everyone else had been watching MC toss Zach over the counter.

But I saw the guard walking over beforehand. And he'd been smiling. As soon as he reached MC he put on his serious cop face, but before that he'd

been happy *about MC going after Zach.*

"What's the matter?" Amy pulled on his sleeve. Her question made him notice he'd fallen behind the others.

"Nothing. Something about that security guard kinda freaked me out. Don't worry," he added, seeing the look on her face. He picked her up and swung her around in a tight circle. "I'm fine. We're gonna have nothing but fun, right?"

"Yes, sir." Amy gave him a mock salute.

JD resisted the urge to glance backwards as they hurried to catch up with the others.

CHAPTER 16

Standing in the shadows behind the strongman's booth, the thing masquerading as a security officer laughed as he watched the students head towards the Castle of Horrors.

He noticed a young girl looking at him. In one hand she held a balloon with a jack-o-lantern face on it. With her other hand she waved at him.

He let his face change, exposing his true nature. Scales sprouted on his skin and horns burst from his skull. "I'll be waiting under your bed tonight, little girl," he whispered.

The child rewarded him with a loud scream. She let go of her balloon and tugged at her mother's sleeve.

"Stop that!" the girl's mother said, pulling roughly on her arm. "I told you to tie the balloon to your wrist. I'm not buying you another."

The security guard, his face already human again, pushed away from the booth and followed them at a distance.

When midnight came, he wanted to be the first one to taste their flesh.

CHAPTER 17

By eleven-thirty, the line for the Castle of Horrors had shrunk to less than half its previous size. JD found himself fidgeting as they inched their way through the back-and-forth maze of ropes that made up the waiting area.

People of all ages surrounded them, packed together so tightly there wasn't even room to walk properly. Instead, everyone moved in a robotic shuffle, feet sliding forward in zombie fashion.

Lulled by the slow, steady progress forward, JD failed to notice danger approaching until a hand came down hard on his shoulder.

"Hey, if it isn't Señor Gimpy and his friends."

JD's stomach dropped at the sound of Ricky Roberts' voice. *Ten more minutes and we'd have been inside.*

"Whatchoo say, boy?" MC clenched and unclenched his fists. A fat vein throbbed at his temple.

JD pushed Amy behind him; at the same time, Freddy stepped forward. Shorter than JD but built like a tank, Freddy had won more than his share of fights growing up. Still, JD knew MC could do a number on the two of them all by himself.

Ricky poked JD in the chest. "Looks like the big, bad boyfriend is scared. He had such a big mouth this afternoon at school, where he knew I'd get in trouble if I laid a hand on him. Now look at him. He...ow!"

JD grabbed Ricky's finger and bent it backwards, increasing the pressure enough to let Ricky know he could break the bone if he wanted to.

"How's that for scared?"

Ricky's eyes grew wide. He tried to take a swing with his left hand, but JD applied more pressure, eliciting another yelp of pain.

"Let go! That's my throwing hand."

MC raised a fist and JD bent Ricky's finger even further. "Stop right there or your quarterback's gonna be riding the bench the rest of the season."

"MC, don't do it." A tear ran down Ricky's cheek. Tendons and muscles stood out on his neck like mountain ranges on a relief map.

"He won't break it. Freakin' pablo don't have da 'nads."

"Ricky, if MC takes another step I guarantee you'll spend the next month with your hand in a cast."

"You do and I swear I'll kill your crippled ass," Ricky said through clenched teeth.

"Hey, isn't that Mulroony and Somers up there?" someone—JD thought it might have been Jeanne DiCenzo—called out.

"Mulroony!" Boz's voice. "Back here."

A voice came from farther ahead of them. "Hey, guys. We saved spots in

line for you."

Traci came up to stand next to Ricky. "C'mon, let's go. He's not worth it."

She stared at JD as she spoke, and he wasn't sure if he saw excitement in her eyes or disappointment.

He let go of Ricky's finger, taking a quick step backward at the same time.

Ricky rubbed his finger and glared at them, but JD understood the anger wasn't directed at him. Ricky was angry with himself for being afraid.

The blonde quarterback flipped JD the finger with his good hand. "Let's go, MC. I can't be bothered with these wussies."

Ricky and MC muscled their way to the front of the line, pushing and shoving anyone in their way. A few people protested the rough treatment, but quickly shut up when they saw MC. Traci, Speedy, and Chantrelle followed them.

Boz and Jeanne remained behind. Jeanne reached out a hand towards Amy. "Are you okay?"

Amy stepped away. "Like you care. Go kiss Traci's ass."

Jeanne looked down. "I deserve that. I treated you wrong, and I'm sorry. But not everyone has your courage." She turned and walked away, pulling Boz along with her.

JD kissed the top of Amy's head. "I know you don't want trouble, but I couldn't just stand there..."

Amy wrapped her arms around his waist and stared up at him. As always, her exotic beauty took his breath away.

"You're right. I don't want trouble, and I'd hate it if you went around starting fights. I don't need someone like that. Been there, not going back. But I don't expect you to be Gandhi, either. You did the right thing tonight. I just worry about you getting hurt."

JD smiled and gave her a hug. "Ames, you're the best, you know that? If you still want to go home, we can leave. We'll rent a movie. That way there'll be no more trouble tonight."

"No, we should stay. You want to see the haunted house, and we can't let those idiots ruin our night."

"That's my girl."

JD kept an eye on the football players, just in case one of them decided to start more trouble, but they seemed content to horse around with each other.

Hopefully we can get through the rest of the night without any more problems.

CHAPTER 18

"Hey, watch it." Neil Jarvis turned to see who had bumped him, and froze when he found himself face-to-face with MC Clark.

"Get the hell outta the way," MC said.

"Yeah, nerd-boy, step aside or you'll be spending Halloween in the emergency room," Pat Mulroony shouted from further up in line. Two other football players laughed.

Danny stepped up next to Neil. "No cutting the line. We've been waiting fifteen minutes already."

"Hey Jackie Chan, don't be flexin' up in my grill, or you'll be eating your egg rolls through a straw."

"Wait, it's okay," Josie grabbed Neil and Danny by their arms and pulled them back. "Go ahead."

"Smart move, chunky stuff." MC laughed and walked past.

"Check it out, it's the Geek Squad." Ricky shot them the finger and Traci made mooing noises at Josie as they went by.

"Jerk offs." Neil gave them the finger back, after making sure none of them were looking.

"Don't let them get to you," Danny said.

"I told you they're assholes." Neil pulled his arm away from Josie. "Doesn't seem to bother you, though."

"Just shut up, all right?" Josie wiped tears away with the back of her hand.

Neil started to say something else but Danny grabbed his arm and whispered, "Let it go. You're never gonna get anywhere with her by making her feel stupid. Just hang back, let her figure it out by herself."

"What makes you the expert?"

"I grew up with four sisters. Trust me, I know how girls think."

Neil took a deep breath and tried to control himself. "All right, I'll back off. But those guys really get me pissed."

"Yeah, they're good at that. At least no one got hurt." Danny sighed, his breath creating a small cloud in front of his face.

The night's still young, Neil thought as they got back in line.

CHAPTER 19

From his booth in front of the Castle of Horrors, the barker shouted at the crowd.

"Beware the Castle of Horrors! Terror the likes of which you've never seen! Not for the weak of heart or faint of soul! See Vampires as old as time! Zombies searching for human flesh! Aliens from other worlds! Come face to face with your greatest fears, if you daaaare!"

"I don't think I'm gonna like this," Amy said, her arms linked through one of JD's.

"C'mon, Ames, don't worry." JD glanced at her and smiled. "We'll walk through, a couple of carnies in Halloween makeup will jump out and try to scare us, and then we'll be done and ready to grab a late night snack before you know it."

"See the monster made from dead human flesh!" The barker's amplified voice carried across the midway, the bass tones vibrating through their bodies. "Feel your chest pound with terror as you hear the howls of werewolves on the hunt!"

A nearby conversation caught JD's ear and he turned his attention away from the barker. A group of younger boys in front of Chris, Dave, and Zach were talking about the Castle.

"This place is awesome, man," one of them said. "It's not like a regular haunted house. There's only one exit, and you can't get out until you go through all the rooms. You can do them in any order you want, except for the last one. That's where the exit is."

"Why can't you just skip straight to the last one?" another boy asked.

"They don't let you. They must watch you from behind the walls or something," replied the first teen.

Their third friend chimed in. "First time I went through, I skipped a couple of rooms 'cause I had to take a wicked piss. I got to the top and all of a sudden this big guy appears out of nowhere and grabs me by the arm. He says I have to visit the lower chambers of Hell before I can enter the final room. He was one weird dude. Like seven feet tall, with scary red eyes and a nasty scar on his face."

"Freaky."

"Yeah, tell me about it. So I did the other two rooms real fast, and they were really..."

Just then the line started to creep forward again and the teens moved out of JD's earshot.

"Did you hear that? It sounds like they're talking about freaky taco guy." Chris said.

JD wanted to ask him what he meant by that, but Amy grabbed his hand.

"Let's make sure we don't go into the same room as Ricky and MC. I don't trust them in a place like this."

Stuck in a room with those two? Not if I can help it.

"No problem. Whatever room they go in, we'll just skip over it. Deal?"

Amy smiled and nodded.

God, when she smiles like that there isn't a thing I wouldn't do for her. He felt her shiver in the brisk air and pulled her closer while they waited their turn.

CHAPTER 20

11:35: A group of students from the high school enters the Castle of Horrors. One of them begins yelling and making scary noises, trying to frighten his friends. A few feet past the entrance, he suddenly becomes quiet, overcome by a feeling of unease.

11:40: Two girls wearing Whitebridge High jackets go inside. Just behind them is a couple with two young boys, the children squealing with anticipated terror and holding tightly to their parents' hands.

11:44: A middle-aged man and his wife take their turn.

11:50: Ricky, MC, and Speedy, together with the girls and the other football players, go inside.

11:52: Jeanne and Boz walk through the gate.

11:54: Clifford, Neil, Danny, and Josie enter the Castle, followed by Chris, Zach, and Dave two minutes later.

11:58: JD, Amy, Freddy, and Paulette step through the entrance.

11:59: The Proprietor holds his hands up in the air, closes his eyes, and takes a deep breath. Throughout the carnival, every ride suddenly comes to a stop, and silence reigns. Electricity crackles through the sky, and the crisp smell of ozone permeates the still air.

The Earth moves another fraction of a degree in its revolution, and it is officially Halloween in Whitebridge.

The Proprietor exhales a deadly, foul breath.

"Nowww!"

Across the carnival and surrounding field, time stops as reality slips to the side.

Inside the Castle of Horrors, new realities burst into being behind closed doors.

And Hell comes to life on a small New York farm.

SECTION II: The Castle of Horrors

CHAPTER 1

Boz

Boz and Jeanne emerged from the dark hallway into a large, open space. Childish drawings of monsters, bats, skeletons, and torture devices covered the cheap plywood walls. The only illumination came from tiny strings of red and orange holiday lights strung haphazardly from the ceilings and walls, and a scattering of small lights recessed in the floor.

A wide ramp ran along one wall and made a wide arc up to the second floor, providing access to a series of doors barely visible in the dim light. Crudely-drawn pictures on each one indicated the time-honored horror story displayed behind the door.

Ricky and the others stood together between the ramp and a rusty, iron staircase that spiraled up through the center of the room to the second floor. People walked up and down the ramp and stairs, entering and leaving rooms. Muted conversation and more than a few screams filled the air.

"This sucks." Traci folded her arms across her chest and flipped her blonde hair back. "It's bad enough I had to stand around in the cold, but I'm not wasting my time in here on this childish crap."

"Sister, I'm with you," Chantrelle said. "Let's just find the exit. I can't carry this stuffed cat around with me all night. We'll go stick it in the car while you guys have your fun, and then we'll meet you outside, a'aight?"

"Fine." Ricky took a hit from Mulroony's flask. "We waited in the friggin' line too, and now I'm getting my money's worth."

Traci snorted and shook her head. Chantrelle grabbed her hand.

"Let's go." They brushed past Boz and Jeanne without saying a word and headed up the ramp.

"You know something, I'm getting a weird feeling about this place," Jeanne whispered to Boz. "Can we leave, too?"

Not caring one way or the other, Boz nodded. A little time away from Ricky and the other jerk-offs would be nice anyway.

"Let's take the stairs, nobody's on them and I'll bet they lead right to the exit."

Boz expected the staircase to be rickety and wobbly, especially with his weight on it, but it didn't sway at all. At the top, they looked down and saw Ricky and the guys from the team go through the second door on the ramp. At the same time, JD and Amy entered the main room. They must have seen which room Ricky and MC entered, because they and the other couple with them immediately headed for a different door.

Several other students also chose doors other than the one Boz's

teammates had gone through.

Smart people. The mood MC's in tonight, it wouldn't be pleasant to be in a small, dark space with him.

The door at the top of the stairs featured a picture of a flaming pit of lava. Grotesquely burned and mutilated bodies filled the pit, while around the rim evil-looking demons kept watch.

Pretty nasty. Bet it scares the crap out of the rug rats. He grabbed the knob but it wouldn't turn.

"What the hell?" he turned to Jeanne. "How are you supposed to get out?"

"Maybe that one's closed," she said. "Let's try the next one back."

They walked down the wide plywood ramp, decorated and painted to look like a dirt trail, and reached the next room just as Traci, Chantrelle, and two girls he didn't know came up the ramp.

"Don't bother trying the door at the top," Jeanne told them. "It's locked. We're hoping this is the way out."

"No, you have to visit each room before they let you out," one of the girls said. Like her friend, she had on a red and black Whitebridge High jacket.

The two girls opened the door and stepped through. Boz caught a brief glimpse of a dark room before the door swung closed. A crude picture of a woman being burned at the stake served as a sign.

Traci frowned. "This majorly sucks. Ricky owes me big time; like, jewelry and flowers big, not just dinner big."

"Relax," Jeanne said. "Let's just do each room as fast as we can and then we'll leave." She opened the door used by the two girls and held it so Boz could follow her.

With a sigh of disgust, Traci strode past them and into the room.

Boz felt a momentary disorientation as he walked through the doorway. He shook his head and then looked around, surprised at the realism of the display surrounding them. Tree branches rustled in the soft breeze, and the earthy odors of pine and wood rot scented the air. Dirt and stone crunched under his feet.

"Hey, where are we?" Jeanne asked. "This isn't a display. Those trees are real. And the ceiling's gone," she added, pointing up at the night sky.

"Maybe that's part of the trick?" Chantrelle asked.

Jeanne shook her head. "It can't be. Even if the door opened out the back of the building we'd just be in the middle of the carnival again."

"So where the hell are we?"

"That's a good question." Boz looked behind them, but the woods stretched in every direction. He walked back a few steps the way they'd come, to rule out any possibility of a trick done with mirrors or holograms.

Jeanne opened her cell phone. "Damn. My phone's dead."

"Mine too," Boz said. "This is not good."

"You think?" Traci sat down on a rock. "This is way freaky. I vote for parking our butts right here and waiting."

"Waiting for what?" Boz asked. "We can't sit out in the woods forever."

"Maybe it's one of those dimensional gate doohickeys, like in the science fiction movies my little brother watches. The people in those movies always get in trouble 'cause they wander off, instead of just waiting for it to open again, or for help to come. Well, that's not happening to me. I'm staying right here."

"I don't know," Jeanne said. "I think we'd be better off finding a town so we can call someone. If we stay here we might never get found."

"Fine. You go for help. I'll stay here. We'll see who gets home first."

Boz glanced from Traci to Jeanne and back again. "I think we need to stick together. Why don't we do this? We'll get some branches and make a big 'X' right here on the ground. Then we'll walk a couple of miles down the trail. If we don't find anything, we'll come back."

Traci rolled her eyes and stood. "Whatever. We'll try it your way. But I think we're just wasting our time."

Boz examined the trail, which began right where they were standing and went into the woods in only one direction. Moonlight turned the dry earth a pale gray that darkened to almost black as the path went deeper into the forest.

"What about those girls who went in ahead of us?" Chantrelle asked.

"I guess they started walking already," Jeanne said.

"Who cares?" Traci's hair glowed almost white in the moonlight as she flipped it back. "Are we going or what?"

Boz sighed and started walking, Jeanne next to him. Traci and Chantrelle followed, Chantrelle still fighting to keep her stuffed animal in her arms.

"Chantrelle, why don't you leave that here?"

"Uh-uh, no way. Hector won me this, I ain't leavin' it."

Boz held his tongue. *If she wants to carry it, let her.*

As they walked, he kept alert for anything that looked familiar. More and more, he felt they were a lot further from Whitebridge than any of them realized.

A *lot* further.

CHAPTER 2

Ricky

"Okay, so we gonna stand here jawin' all night or is we gonna get this party started?" MC asked, as Traci walked away with Chantrelle.

Ricky knew he'd pissed her off. *I should go after her and make things right*. But he just didn't care. Traci was too high maintenance sometimes. Not for the first time he wondered why he'd ever asked her to go steady, instead of just ditching her after she put out the first time.

"C'mon," Ricky said, opening the door to one of the rooms. The air seemed to shimmer for a moment, and then everything came back into focus.

"Whoa." Speedy grabbed hold of a tree branch to steady himself. "Headrush."

"Yeah, me too," Ricky said. "Bet that's one of the effects they rigged up."

"So where we supposed to be at?" asked MC, looking around. "This look like a damn summer camp."

"It is," Pat Mulroony told him. "It's supposed to be one of those Friday the 13th things, where the crazy guy is running around killing people."

"This stuff looks real." Ricky snapped a branch off a nearby tree. "How'd they get the trees and dirt and crap in here?"

"And where's the door?" Pat pointed back the way they'd come. No door stood behind them, only dense forest.

"There's no walls or ceiling, either," Speedy added.

Ricky looked up. Stars glowed in the night sky. Somewhere in the distance, the raspy chirp of crickets played in time to the soft singing of night birds.

"Special effects." MC kicked at a stone. "Like in the movies. That's how they scare ya in these places. This ain't nuthin'. Let's see what else they got."

Ricky took the lead, and a little further down the path he spotted a clearing.

"Hey, guys, check this out."

Spread out in front of them stood a group of log cabins. About a hundred yards further, a wide lake shone like ice in the silvery light of the full moon. Directly ahead of them a large wooden sign hung between two towering trees that framed the path. Painted on it in blood-red letters were the words "Lake Gonnadie."

Speedy laughed. "Oh, that's weak. Couldn't they think of something better?"

"It's a fuckin' carnival, whatcha expect?" Pat said, taking a swig of bourbon. "Let's look around, see where the scary stuff is." He headed towards

one of the cabins. MC started off in another direction.

"I wanna check out the lake, see if it's real," Speedy said.

Ricky shrugged and followed him. "It can't be real, asshole. We're inside a building, remember?"

They'd only gone about forty yards when a piercing scream sounded behind them. "What the hell?" Speedy asked.

"That didn't sound like a special effect. Let's go check it out." Ricky didn't mention it, but it crossed his mind that MC might've encountered someone else, maybe one of the nerds he'd argued with earlier.

MC was great to have around in a fight, or when you wanted to pick on some of the losers that infested their school, but sometimes he was scary, too. He'd earned his stripes as a street kid in the slums of Lexington before his parents died in a drive-by and he ended up with his aunt and uncle in Whitebridge. Ricky didn't mind shelling out a few lumps to some dork in the hallway, or pounding the crap out of an asshole like JD Cole, but MC carried it too far. As in, end up in jail too far.

Ricky and Speedy ran back up the hill, reaching the entrance to the camp just as MC came down the steps of one of the cabins. Dan Harris, another player from the team, was right behind him.

"Who yelled?" Dan asked.

"Not us," Ricky told him.

"Betcha it's one of them fagolas in line behind us. Prob'ly saw the bodies and got all baby-scared." MC snorted.

"Bodies? You mean, like, dead bodies?"

"Yeah, these cabins are full of fake bodies, like the axe murderer or whatever already came through," Dan told them. "We were just sayin' how real they looked when we heard the yelling."

"Let's find Mulroony and bone outta here. I don't wanna waste the whole night. We should be cold-kickin' it live someplace fresh." MC led the way to the next cabin. Just enough moonlight struggled through the grime-covered windows to illuminate an empty room, except for some bunk beds with no mattresses on them.

"Ain't in here," MC said. He called out Pat's name, but no one answered.

As they re-crossed the path, Pat Mulroony came up behind them. "Hey, what's all the yelling about?"

"Someone's screwin' with us," Speedy told him. "Where were you?"

"In the woods, takin' a leak . What's your problem?"

"Jus' wonderin' if you was the wiseass doin' the screamin'."

"Bite me."

Ricky opened the door to the next cabin and nearly fell backwards as a solid wall of stench hit him.

"Damn!" He put his arm over his mouth and nose, but it didn't help.

"Nasty, ain't it?" MC waved his hand in front of his face. "Worse'n yo mamma's cooter."

"I think they pump it into the room. Makes you think the bodies are really dead." Dan pointed across the cabin.

Ricky's stomach did slow somersault and then threatened to climb up his throat. Bunk beds lined two walls. Bodies lay on top of the mildewed mattresses. Whole bodies, pieces of bodies. The odors of blood, piss, and shit filled the air like a haze, forming a foul miasma that made it hard to concentrate. More corpses lay scattered across the floor.

Christ, they must have spent a fortune on this. Everything looks so real. No wonder there's people screaming.

He knelt by one of the hacked up corpses and pushed on a piece with his hand. It felt like a corpse should; cool but not cold. Soft to the touch.

The arm, dislodged by his poking fingers, slid off the cot, the knuckles striking the floor with a dull thud. Blood oozed from the stump and formed a new puddle on the rough wood.

"Holy hell," Ricky said, his voice more of a croak than a shout. "They're real."

"Homie, you be sauced." MC said with a sneer. He walked over to one of the bodies and kicked it. The head rolled away, making a hollow, wooden noise as it bounced across the floor and came to a stop right in front of Ricky. Dead eyes, already going cloudy, bulged from their sockets. The blue-lipped mouth gaped in a silent scream.

Ricky looked down at the face of Chip Somers, the team's second-string quarterback, and everything went blurry. He struggled not to faint as he fell to his knees.

Then the darkness closed in and he gave up.

CHAPTER 3

Neil

Neil watched which doorway Ricky and his friends went into. “Hey, guys, let’s pick a different room than everyone else. No sense being all crowded into one exhibit.”

“How about the space aliens room,” Danny suggested.

“Okay by me,” replied Cliff.

As they reached the alien room, two kids, freshman by the looks of them, were already entering. The girl clutched at her boyfriend’s arm like there might really be an alien on the other side of the door.

That should be me and Josie. The bitter thought rose to the surface of Neil’s brain uninvited. He gave himself a mental kick, desperately trying to focus on having fun.

Danny grabbed the door before it could swing shut behind the teenage couple. “C’mon, guys, let’s go. It looks awesome already.”

Inside, it took a moment for Neil’s eyes to adjust to the dim lighting. Everything went fuzzy for a moment, and then his vision cleared.

With it came the noise.

What the....?

Somehow they’d ended up on Whitebridge’s Main Street. People ran in all directions; disorder and bedlam seemed to be the rule. The unending howls of police, ambulance, and fire sirens, aural evidence of a major disaster, created a violently loud backdrop to the pandemonium.

To the west, the setting sun turned the tops of low hills and two-story houses a bright orange. Directly overhead, the sky was already darkening to a navy blue.

Three police cars blocked the street. The amplified voices of officers urged people to evacuate the city.

Cliff ran up to one of the police officers. “Hey, what’s going on? What happened?”

The cop gave Cliff a look of disbelief. “Where the hell you been, son? It’s the aliens! They’re coming! They already landed in Washington and New York, and now they on their way here. Git home to your families.”

The cop turned his back on Cliff, continued shouting at people to get off the streets and get to safety.

“This is impossible,” Danny said. “How can this be happening?”

“That room at the carnival.” Neil had to shout so the others could hear him. “We’ve been transported somehow from there to here.”

“But where’s here?” Josie asked. “Aliens can’t be attacking

Whitebridge."

"It doesn't matter. Whatever this place is, we have to find someplace safe and figure out a way to get back to the real world. I think we should head for the school. Maybe some of the teachers will be there."

They began pushing their way through the mob that filled the streets. Almost immediately, they came across the two teenagers they'd seen in the Castle of Horrors. Both looked terrified as they tried to get the attention of a police officer.

"You have to help us," the boy shouted. "We were at the carnival, and then we weren't. We don't know what's going on."

The girl held her head in her hands, her blonde hair falling raggedly over her face. The boy looked ready to grab the cop's arm but Danny Chang stepped forward and pulled him away from the officer.

"What the hell's your problem?" the boy demanded.

"We saw you at the haunted mansion. But nobody else here knows about the carnival. They won't believe you. You need to come with us."

"I'm not goin' anywhere with you." The boy yanked his arm away.

"I wanna go home." The girl grabbed onto her boyfriend's arm. "Take me home right now."

"Why don't you guys just leave us alone? We'll be fine."

The boy ran his hands through his long, brown hair. Neil noticed he had multiple earrings in both ears. He had the same look on his face Neil had seen too many times looking back from the mirror when he'd been a freshman and it seemed like the whole world wanted to beat him to the ground.

"Let's go," Neil said. "We need to get to the school."

"Look. What are those lights?" the girl asked, pointing up at the sky.

A shape moved through the sky from the east, its bottom and edges dotted with red, yellow, and orange lights blinking in random patterns. As it drew closer, details grew visible. People pointed at the object and shouted.

"Oh, my god. It's a spaceship," Cliff said.

The shape grew larger. Two more appeared behind it.

The alien fleet had reached Whitebridge.

CHAPTER 4

Amy

JD held up a hand as they entered the Castle's main room. "I don't know about you guys, but I think we should start at the beginning and do everything in order."

He's as excited as the proverbial kid in the candy store, Amy thought, *although nowadays it would be more appropriate to say kid in an electronics store.*

"Sounds good to me," Freddy said. "Hey, you guys want to come along with us?" he asked Chris, Zach, and Dave.

Dave shook his head. "Naw, I want to check out the zombies first. *The Rising*, man, I loved that movie."

"All right, we'll catch you in one of the other rooms, or see you outside," JD said as they walked away.

Zach waved a hand in reply, a joint already between his fingers.

Amy smiled. "Well, we know what *they're* gonna be doing." To herself she added, *As if this place isn't creepy enough. I can't imagine doing it baked.*

JD opened the first door, which showed a childishly drawn picture of a werewolf baying at a full moon. "One wolfman, coming up," he said, holding it for Amy.

As she stepped through, a weird sensation struck her, tiny, ice-cold fingers that tap-danced across her flesh. Then the feeling faded away. The clammy air inside the room brought about an involuntary shiver. Wisps of fog floated past, illuminated by the fake full moon shining overhead.

She grabbed JD's arm, desperate to feel his warmth although she couldn't figure out what had her so spooked.

"What's the matter, scared already?" JD teased, pulling her close.

"It's creepy in here," she whispered. The fog seemed to dampen sounds, but at the same time, she had the feeling of standing in a large, open space.

"It's *supposed* to be creepy," JD said. "That's what we waited in line for."

Freddy stepped past, pulling Paulette along with him, and headed down the dirt path extending out in front of them. In the fog and moonlight, the bushes and scrubby trees lining the path looked alive and menacing.

How did they make this so realistic?

Up ahead, something splashed and Freddy cursed.

"Hey, there's water in here. My feet are soaked. Now I'm gonna have to walk around all night in wet shoes."

"Water?" JD asked. "Why would..."

The distant sound of a wolf howling cut off his words. After a momentary

pause, a second howl came from a different direction, somewhere behind them.

"Oh, man, that's freaky," Paulette said, hugging her arms around herself.

"Let me see." JD knelt next to Freddy. He took off his jacket, rolled up his sleeve, and stuck his arm into the water. It went in up to his elbow.

"Whoa, that's cold."

He pulled his arm out and shook it. The water smelled as bad as Amy imagined it would, all rotten eggs, dead leaves, and old mud.

"I couldn't touch the bottom. There're weeds growing down there, real ones. I don't know what's going on, but it doesn't seem possible. This place is bigger than the room we went into."

"Maybe there's another door." Amy said. "You know, maybe we walked outside, and now we're in a swamp behind the carnival or something?"

"There's no swamp around here. I know these woods. We used to play here as kids. Besides, if we were behind the carnival, we'd be able to see it and hear it. There's nothing around us but more woods."

"What do we do now?" Paulette asked. The quiver in her voice matched the feeling growing in Amy's stomach.

Not liking this. Not at all.

"We keep walking," JD said. "At least for a little while. If nothing changes, then we turn around and walk the other way. There's gotta be something here, wherever *here* is."

Another wolf howled, again from behind them.

"That sounded closer," Freddy said.

"Yeah. I think we should get going."

CHAPTER 5

Neil

"C'mon." Neil grabbed Josie with one hand and the teenage boy with the other. The boy held onto his girlfriend, dragging her along as they followed Cliff and Danny through the screaming, crying hordes.

People pushed and shoved as they fled in all directions. A man near Neil fell to the ground and a woman tripped over him, setting off a chain reaction that sent over a dozen people tumbling to the ground.

Neil stopped. "We should help them."

"Forget it, we gotta get away from here." The boy pulled at his arm until he started running again.

More ships appeared overhead, blotting out the early evening sky. Each was longer than a football field and shaped like a giant triangle. Menacing shapes and protrusions stuck out between the multi-colored lights on their undersides.

Belatedly, the air raid siren sounded in the distance, the long, oscillating wail filling the air like the world's largest wolf.

The alien craft took up positions over the center of town. Neil counted seven of them, but he figured there must be more, too high to be seen, or perhaps cloaked in an invisibility screen.

At this point he would believe anything.

Danny led them off the street and onto someone's lawn. Neil started to ask why they'd stopped, then understood when both Cliff and Josie collapsed to the ground, struggling to catch their breath.

"Oh, man, this isn't happening," the teenage boy muttered, pulling his girlfriend close. She was crying again.

"What are your names?" Neil couldn't think of anything else to say.

The boy looked at him as if Neil was the space invader, but he answered. "I'm Gary, and this is Shawna. We live that way." He jerked a thumb down the street they'd been following.

"What do you think they want?" Josie asked in a hoarse whisper.

Neil shook his head. Normally he'd be distracted by her heaving chest, but right now he could only think of getting somewhere safe. "I think -"

Sudden brightness overhead stopped him in mid-sentence. Everyone looked up as wide hatches on the bottom of each ship slid open and disgorged dozens of small, saucer-shaped craft, each about the size of a large car.

The tiny craft buzzed through the air like metal bees, spreading out across the sky. Without warning, they opened fire on the city. The energy beams caught everyone by surprise, the light so intense it temporarily blinded the

eyes. Further panic ensued as townspeople, many of them unable to see clearly, ran in all directions, trying to escape the devastation raining down from above and the buildings exploding around them.

Neil grabbed Gary by the arm. "Which way to your house?"

"Follow me."

Clinging to each other's hands, the group ran through the crowds of hysterical people, pushing and shoving, not caring if they knocked anyone down.

Behind them, the alien aircraft continued to blast away at the city, turning buildings to rubble, rubble to bare, burning earth. In between the din of the explosions and the teeth-vibrating hum of the aliens' death rays, the screams of the injured and dying vied with the shouts of terror coming from the fleeing crowds.

The further they got from the attack zone the quieter the streets became, but Neil knew it was only a matter of time before the aliens expanded their circle of destruction. They'd have to really push themselves to reach the school before the extraterrestrial invaders destroyed the entire town.

Ten blocks later they reached Gary's house. The surrounding streets and driveways stood empty, evidence that everyone had already evacuated. Like the homes around it, no lights shone from the windows of Gary's house.

They followed Gary inside as he went from room to room, shouting for his parents.

Looks like they didn't wait around for their son to come home, Neil thought.

Gary came back from his rapid walk through the house, a dazed look on his face. "They're gone." He dropped onto the couch. "I can't believe it. They just left. Not even a note."

"Do you have relatives around here, someplace your parents would go, and know you'd look for them there?" Josie asked.

"No. I don't know where they are."

"Maybe they thought you were at my house," Shawna said. "We need to go there next anyway. I have to find out about my family."

Garry nodded, but his blank expression never changed.

Cliff came out of the kitchen. "I tried the phone. It's dead."

"So's my cell," Neil said. The others checked their phones, with the same results.

"No surprise. It's only a matter of time before the whole city loses power, so before we go anywhere we should stock up on flashlights, batteries, candles, matches, anything like that."

Gary told them where to find the flashlights and batteries. Neil helped Cliff gather the supplies, then turned to the others. "All right, let's check Shawna's house next. Which way is it?"

"I live a few blocks away, over on Walnut Street."

"Walnut? Hey, that's right by my house," Neil said. "I'm on Vine."

"We're behind the elementary school. You must live on the other side of it."

"Yeah, the little brats wake me up all the time in the morning, with their yelling and...that's it!"

"What's it?" Danny asked.

"The elementary school. It's set up to serve as an emergency shelter when there's a disaster. I'll bet that's where a lot of the people around here have gone."

"Maybe that's where my parents are," Gary said, his face brightening.

"Mine, too," Shawna said. "They would've known to go there."

"We can hide there until this attack is over," Josie said. "Then we can figure out how to get back where we belong."

Neil allowed himself a smile, proud of his idea. *Maybe I can figure out a way to get us home, too. Then Josie will* have *to notice me. I'll be like a hero.*

Three minutes of fast walking brought the to F.P. Wilson Elementary School. Lights blazed the windows, and cars crammed the parking lot.

"Looks like you were right." Cliff gave Neil a high-five. "Let's go check out the situation.

As they were about to cross the road, Josie stopped. "Wait a minute. What's that noise?"

"What noise?" Gary asked, stepping off the curb.

Neil grabbed him and held him back. "I hear it, too. Like a humming."

At that moment, an alien attack saucer rose up from behind a nearby house and opened fire on the school. The energy beam passed through the roof and both floors in an instant. Glass and metal exploded outward, and the force of the concussion knocked Neil and the others to the ground.

Groups of screaming people burst from the school, many with their clothes ablaze. Immediately, the saucer emitted a different beam of light, this one a sickly, pus-yellow that brought to mind mold on a tree or something foul oozing from a corpse. The beam flicked back and forth in laser-like fashion, picking off the fleeing humans as if they were targets in a video game. Each victim fell to the ground, writhing in agony, skin melting and peeling away to expose the underlying tissues, which just as quickly dissolved into dripping, reddish goo that sloughed from the bones in spongy clumps. Liquefied organs flowed from body cavities, until only brownish skeletons remained, each one lying in a puddle of soupy flesh.

When no more people moved amidst the debris, the spaceship rose and sped away.

"Oh, my God," Josie whispered.

Shawna rolled over and vomited. Neil felt like doing the same, especially

when the greasy odor of roasted meat reached them.

Neil stared at the pile of bricks and twisted metal which moments before had looked to be their salvation. Smoke and flames poured from the gaping crater; the crackle and hiss of fire filled the night air. The parking lot resembled a battlefield, wreckage from the school mixed haphazardly with the twisted metal corpses of Fords, BMWs, and Toyotas.

"We need to hide," Danny said. He wobbled for a moment as he got to his feet.

Josie and Shawna sat in the dew-soaked grass, holding each other and crying. Cliff knelt near them, shaking his head like a dog with water in his ears.

"Hide? How the hell can we hide from that?" Gary asked. A small dribble of blood ran from his nose.

"We'll find a way. They're not gods. They're not infallible." Neil responded.

"What do you mean? They just killed hundreds of people right in front of us, boiled them away to nothing. And half the city is probably gone by now."

Neil felt a smile coming to his face. He knew he was on to something. The trick would be turning it to their advantage.

"Exactly. They killed hundreds of people, but they didn't notice us, standing right here across the street. And even with all those ships, they haven't finished destroying the city yet. The power is still on, for Christ's sake. Either they're just screwing with us, or they're not as smart as they want us to think."

Neil looked at the others, all of whom were staring at him now.

So this is what it feels like to be a leader, to be in charge. Pretty cool. I just hope I don't screw up and get us all killed.

"So now what?" Danny asked him.

"Now we go to my house. If we're going to make it to the high school, we'll need more than a couple of flashlights."

"I don't suppose you've got a room full of grenade launchers or bazookas?" Gary snorted.

"No, but maybe we can salvage something from my electronic equipment. Or get on the internet and call for help. It's worth a try."

Keeping to the shadows, darting between homes, Neil led the way to his house, a large, two-story colonial. Like the others on the street, it stood dark and empty. After calling for his parents and receiving no response, he guided everyone up the stairs to his second floor bedroom. Once inside, he pulled the curtains closed and turned on the lights.

As the others filed in, the irony of the situation wasn't lost on him. *I finally get Josie into my bedroom, and it only took an alien invasion.*

"Check out the hardware," Gary said. "Geek city."

A large desk holding two PCs and two twenty-five-inch flat screen monitors occupied one whole side of the room.

"I've been designing video games," Neil said. "I do all my coding and graphics work on those. I need lots of power and speed. I've already got a company interested in one of them."

"Great, so what's your plan? Google 'how to kill aliens?'"

Neil ignored the teenager's sarcasm. "No, we need to go into the attic." He opened his closet and folded down the ladder.

"What's up there?" Josie asked.

"That's where I have my electronics bench and photography equipment. I've only asked you like a dozen times to come over and see it." Neil tried his best to keep the bitterness out of his voice, but knew he hadn't succeeded.

Josie opened her mouth, closed it again. Neil tried to see her expression in the dim light, but couldn't make it out.

The attic ran the length of the house. Its peaked ceiling rose to ten feet at the center, and sloped away to four feet at the edges. Four rectangular folding tables sat in a row in the center of the room, crammed with electronic gear, wires, circuit boards, and tools. Piles of papers with diagrams scrawled on them lay scattered everywhere.

Josie looked around the room. "Holy crap, you've got more equipment here than the physics lab at school. What do you need all this stuff for?"

"I like to build things," Neil said, hoping he'd heard a note of respect in her voice.

"That's great, but do you have anything that'll save us?" Gary asked.

"I, uh, I don't know." Neil looked around the room, staring at his equipment.

Where to start?

"Hey, guys, I think you should see this." Cliff stood by a small window that looked out on the normally sedate, tree-lined street.

Neil glanced out, felt his stomach drop down to his feet.

This can't be happening, not now. It's too much.

CHAPTER 6

Boz

Traci and Chantrelle's constant complaining made Boz's nerves feel like they'd been rubbed raw. He had no idea how long they'd been walking, because everyone's watches and cell phones had frozen at exactly twelve. He figured they'd probably covered about four miles, their pace slowed tremendously by the darkness, and because Traci and Chantrelle kept stopping to rest their feet and complain.

"How much further are we going to walk?" Traci asked for the eighth or ninth time. "There's nothing here but woods."

Chantrelle chimed in, as she'd been doing all along. "My feet are killing me, and this stuffed tiger weighs like a hundred pounds."

Boz shook his head. *They're like two parrots, chattering the same nonsense over and over.*

"Let's just go a little further," he said, "and then we can rest. This trail has to go somewhere. I mean, that's what trails are for."

"*Pendejo*," Chantrelle muttered under her breath. Traci sniggered.

Boz pretended he hadn't heard them, even though their voices carried clearly in the deep quiet of the forest. Jeanne squeezed his hand in silent support.

Not for the first time, he wondered if remaining on friendly terms with Ricky, Traci, and the others was worth the hassles.

Then he thought about the football scholarship he needed if he wanted to attend college. Jeanne didn't need her cheerleading to get into a good school; she had the grades. But without football, his chances of going anywhere but community college were slim to none.

He knew what would happen if either of them dropped out of their little 'clique.' It had only taken the other girls one day to boot Amy from the cheerleading squad after she dumped Ricky, and she'd been the captain at the time.

Yet she seems happier now than any time since I've known her. I'd like that kind of happiness for me and Jeanne.

Lost in thought, he didn't notice the forest opening up in front of them until Jeanne grabbed at his arm.

"Billy, look. The trail's getting wider."

Boz felt something relax in his stomach and realized he'd been more nervous than even he had known.

"C'mon, guys. Maybe we've reached a town."

With renewed energy, he strode forward, not caring if the other two girls

kept up.

They emerged from the forest into an area of scrubland. The trail widened into a hard-packed dirt road, and the smell of farmland, familiar as a home-cooked meal to Boz, permeated the air. Better still, from behind a thick copse of trees came the sound of distant voices.

"People." Traci brushed a strand of blonde hair from her face and straightened her shirt. "I am *so* glad this nightmare is over. I need a latte and a shower."

They left the road and hurried through the trees. Just before they emerged on the other side, Boz ducked behind one of the larger trunks.

"Stop." He put an arm up and Jeanne paused next to him.

Traci shot him a look and kept going. Boz reached out and grabbed her, yanking her back behind him. Chantrelle stared at him and then halted as well.

"Whoa, aggressive much?" Traci started to say something else, but Boz clamped a hand over her mouth.

"Shut up," he whispered. "Something's not right. Look."

About a hundred yards in front of them, a large mound of land rose up. Dying, straw-like grass covered the hill and the open field around it. The bright moonlight turned the landscape a monochromatic silvery color.

A large group of people were walking up the hill, their voices audible in the still night air. The men wore starched white shirts and black pants with black overcoats or jackets, while the women tended towards heavy cotton dresses or skirts gathered at the waist and billowing outward at the bottom, complemented by jacket-type outerwear.

Many of the hundred or so people held torches that smoked and sputtered, reminding Boz of how movies depicted ancient rituals being carried out.

What disturbed him most were the two women at the front of the line with their hands tied behind their backs. Several men with rifles forced them along, poking and prodding while uttering angry oaths. The cries and pleadings of the two captives rose above the muttered voices of the people.

"Let us go! Please, we haven't done anything. You can't do this."

"Aren't those the two girls who were ahead of us at the carnival?" Boz whispered.

"I think so," Jeanne said. "They're certainly not dressed like the others."

"Maybe we should stay out of sight until we figure out what's going on." Boz waited for Traci to complain, but for once the girl was silent.

Dawn started a slow and easy appearance, lightening the sky and adding more detail to the events unfolding as the armed men herded the girls to the top of the knoll.

Boz had a feeling the added light wasn't necessarily a good thing, as several men got busy erecting two large poles, and then piled branches and sticks around the bottom of each. Jeanne's next comment only confirmed

what he'd already guessed.

"Billy, it looks like they're planning on burning those two girls at the stake."

"Yep. Are those people dressed like pilgrims?"

"Sort of. Actually, they look more like the clothes worn back in the Puritan times."

"Aren't they the ones who burned the witches, like in Salem?"

Jeanne's hands flew to her mouth. "Oh, my God. The picture on the door we went through. It was a witch being burned at the stake."

"Are you trying to tell us we're in Salem, Massachusetts, only it's like, four hundred years ago?" Traci asked.

"Yeah," answered Boz, "I think the carnival sent us back in time."

"That's impossible," Chantrelle said. "Time travel, black holes, that *merde* only happens in freakin' movies and books."

"This doesn't look like a movie."

Several of the men were using heavy rope and leather straps to tie the captives to the poles. The girls screamed and struggled, doing a good job of making their captors' work harder, until a tall, gaunt figure dressed all in black strode forward, a large book held in his hands.

"Silence, foul witches," he shouted, and swung the book with tremendous force into the forehead of the nearest girl.

The resulting *crack* echoed all the way to the group hiding in the trees, and the blow drove the girl's head back into the pole. The man went to the next girl and delivered a similar strike.

"The power of the Bible commands you to silence!" Turning his back on the now motionless captives, he ordered his men to finish binding them.

With the two girls securely tied, the silver-haired man in the black shirt and white collar raised his hands and began preaching to the crowd in a loud, powerful voice.

"I, Reverend Nathaniel Danforth, representing the people of our Sovereign Lord and Lady the King and Queen, do present that these two brought before you, by their own account named as Mary Chase and Elizabeth Sherman, have been found guilty on this day, the thirtieth of October, in the year of sixteen ninety-eight, for the practice of the detestable arts called witchcraft and sorceries.

"Said arts were practiced feloniously and maliciously within the boundaries of Salem, in the county of Essex, and are an affront to the dignity and peace of our towne. They are hereby sentenced to burn for their sins, with no hope of redemption for their souls, which shall hereafter spend eternity in the fiery pits of hell."

At the end of his oration, the minister raised the heavy tome over his head while the crowd cheered and shouted.

"Billy, we've got to do something," Jeanne whispered.

"What can we do? Run up there and say the girls aren't witches? How fast do you think we'd be roasting on our own poles?"

"But we can't just let them die."

"We have to wait. Maybe some of the people will leave and we'll have a chance to get them loose. In the meantime, we need to figure out how to stay alive so we can get home."

"I'm all for that," put in Traci. "I'm not risking my life to save two people I don't even know. Nuh-uh."

"I'm with Traci," said Chantrelle. "I ain't committin' suicide for two *chicas* I never seen before."

Boz caught Jeanne's pleading gaze and shook his head. "We can't risk it. I won't let anything happen to you, or us."

On the grassy mount, men were pouring containers of dark liquid over the stacks of wood, liberally dousing the girls as well. The harsh odor of kerosene wafted back to Boz, telling him there'd be no chance to save the girls.

Their job done, the men stepped back and Reverend Danforth approached, a burning torch in his hand. "Let this be a lesson to all who would practice the satanic arts of witchcraft in our community. Die, witches, die!"

"Die, witches, die!" The crowd took up Danforth's chant as the minister lit first one pile of kindling and then the other. Flames sprouted from the piled wood and black, greasy smoke rose up, rousing the girls into full awareness.

"Nooo," one of them screamed, over and over. The other girl jerked and twitched while making inarticulate sounds of terror.

Jeanne buried her face against Boz's shoulder and he wrapped his arms around her. As the flames licked at the girls' jeans and their flesh began to burn, their cries changed from fear to pure pain. Boz covered Jeanne's ears with his hands. Chantrelle sobbed quietly, and even Traci turned away.

All too soon, the fire reached the girls' torsos. Through the flames, Boz caught glimpses of charred sticks where their legs used to be. He'd thought the sight of burning bodies might sicken at least a few of the townspeople, but not a single person turned away, not even the women.

Gently taking Jeanne by the arm, he led her through the glade and back to the road.

"Let's get out of here before someone sees us. I think Traci was right, we'll be better off in the woods than going into town."

The others followed without a word. They hurried back down the path and into the relative safety of the forest. His relief at getting them away was short-lived, however, as a voice addressed them from deeper into the trees.

"Ho, and what have we here? More strangers. Well, if you value your lives, you'll come with me before the Reverend and his followers find ye."

CHAPTER 7

Ricky

"Hey, man, you okay?"

Ricky opened his eyes at the sound of Speedy's voice. "Yeah. Chip...?"

"Dead. And he ain't the only one," Speedy said.

Ricky stood up. He felt nauseous, but at least his head wasn't spinning anymore. "Jesus, there's more?"

"I recognize that girl by the door, she's in my English class," Dan said in a choked voice.

"There's another body over here," Pat told them from across the room.

"Some mo'fo's messin' with us," MC said, "and I'm gonna find his ass."

He started towards the back of the cabin. Ricky followed right behind him. If there was a crazy serial killer on the loose, the safest place to be was behind MC Clark.

Then things changed in a hurry.

A deafening roar filled the cabin as the front door came crashing down. A huge figure stood there, a rumbling chainsaw held in his enormous, hairy hands. Hideous scars crisscrossed the man's face and scalp, giving it the appearance of a poorly-sewn quilt. His bald, ravaged head glowed like a light bulb in the bright moonlight. Although he easily topped six-seven and four hundred pounds, he moved like a cat, all grace and speed.

The stranger turned towards Dan and swung the chainsaw. The gas-powered blade arrowed into Dan's belly, sending gobbets of flesh across the room and peppering Ricky with organic shrapnel.

Terror froze Ricky in place. The killer's heavy muscles flexed under his red-checkered flannel shirt as he drove the saw completely through Dan's twitching, screaming body and into the wall behind him. The scar-faced man jerked the saw back and forth, but it remained stuck in the wood.

"Run!" Pat heeded his own advice and dodged past the giant and out the front door.

The whine of the chainsaw changed in pitch as the madman pulled it loose from the wall and swung at Pat's fleeing form, just missing him.

Strong hands grabbed Ricky's jacket and he found himself practically airborne as MC spun him around and pushed him towards the back of the cabin.

"Move yo ass!"

Ricky moved.

Speedy, twice as fast as either of them, was already twenty feet down the path by the time Ricky and MC hit the bottom of the stairs and started towards

the next cabin.

Pat came around the corner and caught up to them. “He’s coming!”

Ricky glanced back just in time to see Stitchface leap down the back steps and head towards them, moving much faster than someone his size should have been able to.

“Hurry,” Ricky shouted, hating the way his voice jumped an octave.

They entered the next cabin, MC knocking the door open with his shoulder.

“Now what?” Mulroony asked, kicking over an old bunk and leaning it against the door.

“The kitchen,” Ricky said, sudden inspiration coming to him. He darted into the next room and over to the two-burner stove. A metal-wrapped hose connected it to a large propane tank against the outside back wall of the cabin.

“If the gas is still on, we can blow this sucker sky high.” Ricky turned the knob. A hissing sound from the burner rewarded his efforts.

“Who’s got a lighter?”

Pat shook his head but MC said, “I got matches. I was hopin’ we could score some blunts tonight.”

“Gimme.” Ricky turned on the rest of the burners, letting the gas flow into the small kitchen.

A sudden crash sounded from the other room. “Here he comes.” Mulroony backed across the small room.

“Out the back door, quick,” Ricky told them. MC and Mulroony ran out, leaving him alone in the kitchen. Slow, heavy footsteps reached him from the outer room.

“Hey, freak,” Ricky shouted. “Come and get me if you can.”

He lit the entire book of matches and placed it on the stove, and then hurried outside, pulling the door shut behind him.

“Go!” he screamed, moving as fast as he could down the path.

I really hope this...

A deafening roar filled his ears and a hurricane-force wind picked him up and thrust him forward. He experienced a moment of perfect weightlessness, body-surfing a wave of hot air, before landing hard in a mass of branches several feet into the woods.

Ricky coughed, trying to catch his breath. Flames completely enveloped the cabin. Fiery meteors of wood still fell from the sky. Inside the heart of the inferno, a large figure stood up and then fell down again.

Ricky rose to his knees, admiring his work.

Let’s see JD Cole do something like that.

CHAPTER 8

JD

Based on the ache in his knee, JD figured they'd been walking for about fifteen minutes. They'd heard several more wolf calls to the sides and behind them, closer each time.

"How long do you think this trail is?" Freddy asked.

JD didn't reply. It was obvious they weren't in the carnival anymore, or even in Whitebridge. Each step they took strengthened his belief, and added to the knot of fear growing in his stomach. He'd spent his entire life watching movies about people in these kinds of situations.

Usually they ended up torn to shreds.

Imagination, this is not the place for you. Things like werewolves and haunted castles don't exist in real life.

Of course, that was before they came around the bend in the trail and saw the castle looming up ahead of them, a full moon perched over the top of it.

"What the hell?" Paulette asked.

"I don't think we're in Kansas anymore," JD said, hoping to relieve the tension. No one answered him.

It took five minutes to reach the castle, during which they heard two more wolf calls. As they got closer, they saw two people standing by the castle's towering wooden doors. An older-looking couple, dressed in modern clothes. The man, who appeared to be in his fifties, regarded the thirty-foot high entryway with a distinct frown.

Stopping several yards away so as not to scare them, JD asked in a loud voice, "Hello? Can you tell us what this place is?"

His idea failed as the man and woman both emitted short cries of alarm.

"Damn, boy, you scared the hell out of us," The portly, balding man gave a nervous laugh and pushed his half-moon glasses up with one finger.

"My name's John Chisholm. This is my wife Dianne. Damndest thing. We were at a carnival, and then all of a sudden we found ourselves here. Been standing around ever since, trying to figure out how to get inside, get out of this cold and damp."

"Carnival? You mean the one in Whitebridge? Were you in the Castle of Horrors?" JD felt the first inklings of understanding growing in his head.

"As a matter of fact, we were. Don't know what the hell's going on, but I sure don't like it."

"You and me both," Freddy said. "Say, aren't you Mrs. Chisholm from the bank?" he asked, peering closer at the matronly woman who up until now had been silent.

"Yes, I am. And who are you, young man?"

"Freddy Perillo. My dad owns Perillo Farms. You took care of refinancing his mortgage earlier this year."

"Oh, yes. I know your father. Nice man. Good to see you."

"You too," Freddy replied.

"I hate to interrupt, but we should save conversations for when we get inside." JD walked over to the doors and stared at them.

"You won't find a way in there," Mr. Chisholm told him. Another push of the glasses. "I've been here over an hour and I can't even figure out how they open."

A vague fact from a book he'd read on medieval castles surfaced in JD's thoughts.

"If I remember correctly, these big doors were used to let troops and merchants in and out of the castle. They were too hard to open just to let a couple of people through whenever they needed to go in or out. Instead, they had smaller side doors someplace."

He walked to the right, moving past the towering gate and around a corner. "Over here."

When the others joined him, he pointed out the simple wooden door set into the stone wall at the back of an alcove. He gripped the iron handle and tugged at the door, almost losing his balance when it swung open easily on its metal and leather hinges.

"Let's get inside. Maybe we can start a fire."

I'd like to find some weapons, too. I have a feeling we're going to need them.

Another howl drifted through the night air.

And soon.

CHAPTER 9

Jeanne

Jeanne and the others stopped as a middle-aged woman stepped out from behind a tree. She wore the same style clothing as the other villagers.

"Hurry." She motioned with a thin-fingered hand. "Danforth has spies everywhere. If he catches ye, it'll be the stake for all of ye."

She turned and strode back into the woods, away from the path. Jeanne didn't hesitate. She grabbed Boz's hand and started off after the woman.

"Wait, it could be a trap," Traci said.

"If someone wanted to catch us, they could have done it any time. If this woman can keep us safe, we need to follow her."

"I'd rather take my chances with them than wait here for that freaky preacher and his homeboys," Chantrelle said.

"Fine." Traci gave one of her frequent exaggerated sighs and followed.

As they pushed their way through the scrub growth between the older pines, oaks, and maples, Boz asked, "Those two girls stepped through the door only a couple of minutes before us, but it would've taken several hours, at least, for them to walk to town, get caught, and be found guilty of witchcraft. How could all of that happen so fast?"

Jeanne thought for a moment before answering. "We have to accept that we've been sent somewhere, or some time, else. Time might not flow at the same rate in this place. Two or three minutes in our world could be a day or more here."

"So those girls went into the room only a minute before us, but they could have been here for a day or longer."

"Hours, a day, who knows? Maybe it's because the door shut after them, and then we went in."

"That's not good. It means we could be stuck here for days or weeks before anyone back home realizes we're missing."

"Yeah. It also makes you wonder what else is going on at that carnival."

Chantrelle had come up behind them in time to hear Jeanne's last comment. "You think Hector and the others could be in trouble, too?"

Jeanne looked back at her friend. "It's possible. If all this is caused by the carnival, then everyone there is in danger." She wondered about Amy. *I hope she's safe.*

Ahead of them, the woman paused and looked back. "Hush. Sounds travel far, and you never know where the Preacher's eyes and ears might be. Now hurry, it's not much farther."

I really hope she's on our side. Otherwise we are well and truly screwed.

Another ten minutes of walking brought them to a small clapboard house with a slate roof. The front door opened onto a wooden porch framed by a white railing. Wispy smoke drifted from the stone chimney.

The woman went up the two steps and opened the door.

"Henry. More strangers have appeared. I found them amongst the trees near Gallow's Hill, and bade them come with me to safety until such time as we can get them far away from here."

A young man of about twenty emerged from the cabin. The family resemblance between Henry and the woman was immediately evident. Both had narrow, sharp-featured faces, with dark eyes and hair, and both were tall, with figures so lean they bordered on emaciated.

Henry wore simple black pants and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, exposing cord-like muscles on his forearms.

They might be thin, but I'll bet they're in fantastic shape. There's a diet secret to bring home. The Pioneer Diet. Physical labor all day and eat just enough food to survive.

"Henry, look 'round the property and make sure we're alone. I need to speak with these four."

"Yes, mother," Henry said, confirming Jeanne's guess at their relationship.

The woman led them into a combination sitting room and eating area. Past it, a small but functional kitchen and two closed doors were visible. A few simple throw rugs decorated the plank floors.

Rather than being plain and functional, the wooden furniture in the room showed the distinct style and flair of a master craftsman. Detailed, ornate carvings decorated the legs of the table, chairs, and sofa. Both the table and glass-fronted hutch had been made from a beautiful dark cherry wood.

Traci gasped as she entered the main room. "My mother and her friends would pay a fortune for this furniture. They spend their weekends buying antiques that aren't half as nice."

The woman seemed taken aback by Traci's statement, but she understood it to be a compliment.

"My late husband, Abraham, made most of this. Henry has the talent as well, although he is still too young to be anything but an apprentice."

The woman seated herself in a rocking chair near the fireplace and motioned for the others to take seats as well.

"My name is Gertrude Johnson. For the time being you are welcome in my home, for the simple fact that ye seem to be enemies of Reverend Danforth and his men. However, should I find you are not what ye seem, I will be more than happy to turn ye over to his not so tender attentions."

Henry entered the room, holding a long rifle.

The woman chuckled when Chantrelle let out a small gasp. "As ye can

see, we are not without protection here. I advise ye to answer my questions truthfully."

"What do you want to know?" Boz asked.

"First of all, from whence do ye come? I know ye to be strangers to our town, as were the two women who came before ye. Second, for what purpose have ye come here?"

Jeanne looked at the others. Chantrelle said "Nuh uh, not me."

Traci shook her head. Boz gave Jeanne a smile and indicated she should start.

Great, so now I'm the leader? Jeanne cleared her throat and thought for a minute. What to say? How do you explain haunted carnivals and time travel to someone from seventeenth century Salem without being branded a witch? She decided to take a chance with the truth.

"First of all, let me begin by saying you're right, we're not from around here. We're strangers, but we are not witches or supernatural beings."

"I can see that with my own two eyes, girl. Get on with your story."

"Right. Well, as near as I can figure, we were sent back in time by magic we still don't understand. We were in a carnival, er, a fair or festival, I guess you would say, and the next thing we knew we were here."

Mrs. Johnson didn't seem to be alarmed by this information, so Jeanne decided to risk a question of her own. "Those two girls we saw being burned as witches also came from our time, just before us. What did they do wrong?"

"What did they do? They showed themselves to be different, which is a bad thing to do in this town. According to Reverend Danforth, those who speak not as we do, and dress not as we do, are in league with the devil himself, and most likely be witch or warlock. Your friends made things worse by consorting in their jail cell."

"Consorting? What do you mean?" interrupted Chantrelle.

"They were found displaying untoward affection to each other, a sin in any man or woman's bible. They were sentenced immediately by Danforth and the Judge and taken to the hill for burning."

They were lesbians. I guess Boz and I should be careful too, just in case public displays of affection between men and women are frowned upon as well. Don't want to end up with a scarlet letter on my forehead.

Or a fire under my feet.

Mrs. Johnson looked at Jeanne. "So, you say you've come back in time, do ye? Hmm."

Boz cleared his throat. "No offense, but you don't seem all that surprised."

"Surprised? Why no, I dare say 'tis truth. I've heard tell of spells such as this, although I never witnessed one."

"Spells? You mean, like witchcraft? Are you a witch?" Traci blurted out.

"Hush," Henry hissed from his post at the doorway. "Do not say such things aloud. 'Tis blasphemy to even speak of it, and Danforth has his spies everywhere."

His mother waved a hand at him, motioning for her son to calm down, while at the same time nodding her head in agreement.

"Aye, I be of the Wicca," Mrs. Johnson said. "'Tis how I knew those girls, and yourselves, be no more witches than trees. But it matters not what I think, only what Danforth believes. Since my husband passed ten years ago, I've kept to myself here in the woods, raising my son in the traditional ways as best I can."

"How have you kept the secret for so long?" Jeanne asked.

"Before Danforth came to town 'twas much easier. My husband was of the faith as well, and chose this place for its seclusion. Being a carpenter by trade, so it made sense to the townsfolk that he be surrounded by the wood he needed for his work."

Mrs. Johnson's sharp features softened as she spoke of her husband. "For more than twenty years we kept our secret, with not a single suspicion cast our way."

Henry took up the story. "Four years ago, Danforth arrived in our town and began preaching the evils of witchcraft. Within weeks, he converted the townsfolk to his cause. One day, Danforth demanded those accused of witchcraft be burned at the stake, and not a single soul stood up in defiance. Since then, there have been more than twenty-five burnings and just as many hangings. We daren't say a word, lest we be judged and found guilty."

"Sucks for you. But the important thing is us getting away from here with all our body parts intact," Traci said.

"Traci, will you be quiet?"

"No, Jeanne, Traci's right," Boz interjected. "Rude, but right. We need to get as far away from Salem as we can. Mrs. Johnson, we thank you for helping us, but we can't stay here. It's too dangerous, for us and for you."

"I don't suppose you got a spell can do that, *mama*?" asked Chantrelle.

"No, child, that would take one much more powerful than I. But 'tis true we cannot hide ye here for long." She glanced back at her son.

"Henry, find some clothing for these people to wear. We'll take them back to whence they came, so they might find their way back home."

Henry nodded and went down the hall into one of the bedrooms. Before too long he returned with an armful of clothing.

"You look to be the same size as my late husband," Mrs. Johnson said, handing some items to Boz. "You ladies will have to make do with my cast offs."

Traci, Jeanne, and Chantrelle went through the clothes, picking out dresses and blouses that looked like they would fit. Mrs. Johnson led the three

girls to her bedroom to change, while Boz used Henry's room for the same purpose. Henry also gave them carry sacks for their original clothes. After a few struggles with the unfamiliar clothing, they met back in what Mrs. Johnson referred to as the parlor.

"Now, can ye find the place where you entered our world?" Mrs. Johnson asked Boz.

"Yeah, I made sure to mark the spot well, so we could always find it. All we have to do is follow the trail a few miles."

"We will take you to the road, but from there you must complete the journey alone," Henry said. "We cannot chance being found in your presence."

"We understand," Jeanne told them. "And we thank you for everything you've done for us."

"Don't be thanking me 'til ye be back home and safe," Mrs. Johnson said.

The Johnsons led the way back into the woods. After fifteen minutes of walking, Mrs. Johnson stopped and held up her hand. "Through the next stand of trees is the path you seek. When ye reach it, turn to the right. Once on the road, take utmost care. Danforth's people can come upon ye in the forest as easily as in town. If ye hear or see anything, take yourselves into the trees and hide."

Boz started to thank the Johnsons again, but before the words left his mouth, the all-too-familiar booming voice of Reverend Danforth came from behind a tree.

"Mrs. Johnson is quite correct."

CHAPTER 10

Neil

Down on the street, one of the smaller alien ships had landed behind the burning school. Three figures emerged from it, illuminated in perfect detail by the roaring fire.

The aliens stood almost seven feet tall, with long, bony arms and legs, and short, squat torsos. Masses of wrinkles covered their brownish-green skin.

They look like rotting Shar-pei dogs, Neil thought.

Each one wore a short, dark kilt-like garment, but a lack of sexual features made it impossible to tell if they were male or female. Around their waists hung some type of utility belt, with numerous pouches and other items clipped to it.

Neil's gaze went to their faces, and then he wished it hadn't. Atop each long neck sat a triangular-shaped head, vaguely canine or ursine in appearance. A long snout protruded forward, filled with oversized, pointed teeth. The eyes, however, were unlike any mammal's. Round and bulging, they were made of hundreds of facets that reflected the reddish-orange glow of the flames. The coruscating display made it seem as if the aliens' orbs burned with a hatred of anything human.

"What are they doing?" Shawna whispered.

"They're looking for survivors," Danny said. "We need to make sure they don't see us. I don't think they're interested in diplomatic discussion."

As if to emphasize Danny's concern, just then two people jumped out of a parked car and sprinted across the parking lot, heading for the street.

"Oh, no," Josie whispered.

The aliens turned towards the fleeing humans. They moved in bird-like fashion, heads darting to the side and then forward on their elongated necks. Almost too fast for the eye to see, one drew a weapon from its belt and fired. Several cars exploded, the force of the blast hurling the two unlucky people to the ground.

The invaders rushed forward, their movements reminding Neil of an angry ostrich he had once seen on a documentary. The bird's jerky, almost reptilian gait had looked ungainly and awkward, but when it attacked the cameraman, it moved surprisingly fast, lashing out with its spurred feet so quickly the man was seriously wounded before he even had a chance to defend himself.

The aliens reached their prey and grabbed at the two humans with long, six-fingered hands. Each digit ended in a claw that would have put an eagle to shame. A serpentine neck darted forward as one of the aliens bit a man on the

shoulder. He froze, then fell over and lay motionless.

Then all three attacked the other man, heads snaking down to tear off chunks of flesh. The aliens swallowed the meat whole, lifting their heads and using undulating motions of their necks to move the food down. It only took a couple of minutes for them to devour most of the body. When they finished their gruesome meal, they rose and continued searching the remaining cars.

In the attic, everyone backed away from the window, unable to watch any longer. Shawna sank down to the floor and started crying again.

Gary moaned. "I don't wanna die like that."

"We'll be safe up here for awhile," Neil said. "Turn off the lights and don't make any noise. They won't find us."

Danny went over to the attic entrance and flicked the switch, plunging the room into darkness.

"Now what?" Josie whispered. "Did you see their eyes? Maybe they can see in the dark. Hell, maybe they can see us by the heat we give off. For all we know we just made ourselves easier to find."

"What the hell do you want me to do?" Neil asked, fighting to keep his voice low. "I don't know any more than you do about what's going on. So if you have a better idea, let me know."

"Here's one," Cliff said from the window, where he continued to watch the street. "We better find some weapons, and fast. There're more of them leaving the ship, at least ten. It looks like they're going house to house searching for people. It's only a matter of time before they find us."

Shit. "Okay, everyone. Look around. Arm yourselves with whatever you can. Don't worry about breaking anything, it doesn't look like my experiments are gonna mean much after tonight."

"I found this." Josie held up a long lighter that emitted a two-inch flame. Gary took apart a camera tripod, leaving him with a three-foot metal club. Danny removed the flash off the camera that had previously been on the tripod.

"What's that gonna do?" Gary asked him.

"Did you see the size of their eyes? I'll bet they're real sensitive to light. If one of them gets close to me I can blind it, and then we can attack it while it can't see."

Neil searched with the others, but couldn't find anything more dangerous than a screwdriver.

"Guys, I'm going downstairs," he said, moving towards the trap door. "I'll see if I can find something better, like some butcher knives or something."

"You can't go down there. What if those aliens come in?" Josie asked.

"I'll have a better chance with a cleaver than this little screwdriver. Besides, Cliff and Shawna don't have any weapons either. I'll get something

for them, too."

"Careful, Neil," Cliff said from the window. "They're getting closer. They're using some kind of scanning device in front of each house. It only takes them a few minutes to figure out if anyone's inside. So far they haven't..."

"They haven't what?" Danny asked.

"Wait, something's happening. Five of them just went into a house. One kicked down the front door like it was nothing."

"That's it. I'm going downstairs while they're all occupied."

In the kitchen, he located three carving knives, which he wrapped in a dish towel and wedged into his belt. From there he moved into the oversized pantry his parents used as a combination storage closet and junk room.

A scream from outside shattered the silence. He pushed aside a corner of the white lace curtain covering the pantry window, which gave him a forty-five degree view of the street. Across the road, four aliens emerged from a house. Each one carried a human body, which they dumped onto the front lawn near the curb. The people didn't move as the aliens stacked them like a cord of human firewood.

A child of about ten burst from the house, yelling at the top of her lungs. A fifth creature followed close behind, and grabbed the young girl before she moved twenty steps away from the porch. Long arms whipped forward, pulling the child into a tight embrace. Fast as a rattlesnake, the alien's head shot forward and bit the girl on the wrist. She had time for one more scream before her body went still.

The alien tossed her pajama-clad body on top of the rest of her family. The five invaders then walked away without a second glance, heading across the lawn to the next house.

Neil wiped his sweaty palms on his pants and turned away from the window. He pawed through the cabinets, careful not to make any noise. He'd reached the point of giving up and returning to the attic when he saw it.

Bingo! Finally, something's going right.

He shoved the object into his pocket, grabbed another flashlight, and hurried back to his friends.

In the attic, Gary hugged a weeping Shawna against his chest. Josie and Danny sat at one of the tables, quietly discussing what the vulnerable parts of the aliens might be.

"Neil, something happened while you were gone," Cliff said, from his seat at the window.

"I know. I saw them kill those people."

"I don't think they're dead." Cliff waved for Neil to join him. "I've been watching, and every once in a while one of the bodies twitches a little. I think they're paralyzed or something. Maybe the aliens are taking them as

prisoners."

"Or maybe they're just saving them for dinner." Neil watched for a moment, but didn't see any of the bodies move. He turned away from the window and passed out the carving knives to Shawna, Cliff, and Danny.

"What about you?" Danny asked. "Don't you need one?"

"Nope. I've got something better. You're not going to believe what I found in the pantry. I thought my Mom made Dad throw this out years ago."

He pulled out the cylindrical object, flicked a switch on the handle. The ten-inch rod telescoped out an additional twelve inches, narrowing to a pencil-thin tip. Contact points studded the metal along its length.

"What the heck is that?" Josie reached out to touch it.

Neil pulled the device away. "Don't touch that part." He turned the rod around and held it so she could grasp it at the base. "Hold it by the handle. It's a taser wand."

"What's a taser wand?"

"It's like a stun gun, except it's a lot bigger and packs more of a punch." Neil took the wand back from her, hit the 'off' button, and then tucked it into his belt.

"One smack with this baby and you can put someone out for an hour."

"You better hope it works on aliens," Cliff said, backing away from the window.

"Why?"

A loud crash from downstairs answered Neil's question.

The aliens had found them.

"Okay, everyone get to either side of the room. Stay down, and spread out."

"Go for the eyes," Josie said. "Stab them, slash them, whatever you can do. If they can't see us they can't bite us."

Neil glanced across the dark room. Silhouettes moved about, gray ghosts shrinking back into the shadows under the eaves. Danny stood alone in the center of the attic, arms straight out, camera flash held in shaking hands.

Hope he doesn't drop it.

Downstairs, doors slammed and glass broke as the aliens worked their way through the house. From the noise they made, Neil guessed only two or three had come in.

Maybe luck is on our side this time.

All too quickly, the sounds reached Neil's spare room. He winced at the sound of overturned computer equipment. He gripped the taser wand so tightly his knuckles hurt, but the pain kept him focused.

Slow footsteps sounded on the collapsible staircase.

This is it, here we go...

Heat rose in Neil's face as a trickle of warmth ran down his left leg.

Some hero I am.

The trap door flew open with a tremendous crash, rebounding off the floor so hard it almost closed again. Two aliens appeared, heads jittering back and forth, multi-faceted eyes reflecting the dim light like four miniature disco balls. Just when Neil thought Danny had lost his nerve, the world disappeared in a flash of white light.

Shit! Forgot to close my eyes.

One of the aliens cried out, a high, piercing whistle-squeal, the first noise of any kind he'd heard them make.

Neil pushed forward from his crouch and swung blindly with the baton, aiming for the point where the noise had come from. He struck something, and a second screech rewarded his efforts. Through the haze of red and purple afterimages left by the flash, he saw his friends attacking the intruders, and then everything grew clear as someone turned on a flashlight.

Gary swung low with his metal pole, catching the legs of first one and then the other of the aliens. Both of them went down, clutching at their lower limbs. Cliff and Danny immediately moved forward, stabbing at the bulbous eyes with their knives.

Danny shouted as his knife pierced one of the jeweled orbs and shattered it. Dark, thick ichor flowed out of the socket.

The creature's cries changed to ear-splitting shrieks that crawled across Neil's skin, the sensation worse than a hundred fingernails dragged against a blackboard. Every filling in his mouth vibrated in sympathetic harmony, and he screamed at the top of his lungs just to drown out the creature's wails.

The noise only got worse as Cliff, Danny, and Gary continued their attack, leaving the monsters blind and thrashing on the floor. Gary stepped forward and swung the tripod leg as hard as he could against one alien's head. The creature shuddered once and then went still. Gary repeated the process on the second alien, with the same result. Neil and his companions stopped their own shouting and gathered around the two motionless forms.

"Are they dead?" Danny reached out and poked a thin, mottled arm with his knife.

"Cut their friggin' heads off," Gary said, still panting hard from his exertions. "That'll kill 'em for sure."

"No, don't get close to their mouths," Josie told him. "Let's just burn them."

Neil looked up, surprised at her uncharacteristic display of savagery. Her normally pretty face had changed; her eyes wide and bulging, her lips thin and pressed together.

Is it fear or rage? And do I look like that to her?

"Okay, but first let's get their weapons," Cliff said. "If we can figure out how to use them, we can protect ourselves a lot better."

Careful not to touch the claws, he pried the weapon from the hand of the first alien and then repeated the process on the second creature.

"All right, now we..." Shawna's scream cut off the rest of his words.

Neil looked up and his body froze. A third alien had crept into the attic and stood only a few feet away. It gripped Josie's arm in one hand, holding her limp body upright like a shield. A dribble of blood flowed from a wound on her shoulder.

It started to reach its free hand towards its utility belt.

"Nooo!" Neil lunged forward with the taser rod and poked the alien in the chest before it could fully draw its weapon.

The high voltage shock knocked the creature backwards, Josie and the gun falling to either side. Before it could recover, Neil shoved the taser wand into its mouth, pushing down as hard as he could.

The alien jerked and shook as if in the throes of a seizure. Smoke rose from its mouth and a fetid odor filled the air as the electrical current charred otherworldly flesh.

The beast kicked and spasmed, but Neil kept his grip. Even when the body ceased moving, he shoved downward, putting all his weight into it, until finally Danny pulled him away.

"Neil, that's enough. You killed it."

Neil dropped the taser and knelt beside Josie. He put an ear to her chest, touched her wrist. "She's breathing, and her pulse seems good."

He said her name, gently slapped her cheeks.

"She won't wake up."

"There's nothing we can do for her here. We need to get her to a doctor," Danny said.

"We can't go outside. There's still more of those things out there," Shawna told them.

"We have to. I can't let her die. Cliff, let me see one of their weapons."

Cliff handed one of the guns to Neil and kept another for himself. Gary already had the third.

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

"Take it apart. If I can figure out how it works, maybe we can build more. Then we'll be on even ground."

"Can you do it?"

Neil looked at him. "We'll find out."

He cleared a spot at one of his worktables and turned on a small desk lamp. He knew the light might attract other aliens, but what choice did they have? Hoping the gun didn't have a self-destruct mechanism, he opened his tool kit, took a deep breath, and went to work.

CHAPTER 11

Ricky

Ricky extricated himself from a bush and brushed the leaves and dirt from his clothes. Bleeding scratches on his hands and face stung in the chill air.

"Yo, mutha, that was blazin'," MC said from nearby.

"Is he dead?"

"Shit, we burned that biyatch up. If that whore ain't dead, I'll go bitch slap his mayonnaise ass 'til he be done for good."

MC smacked him on the back so hard Ricky thought he'd end up in the bushes again.

"How'd you think of blowin' the place up?"

"I dunno. Saw it in the movies. We'd have been screwed if the gas wasn't on."

"Yeah, well it was. Now let's get our bad selves outta here."

"To where?" Pat Mulroony asked.

"Let's try the lake," Ricky said. "If we can find a boat, we can see if there's another road or something on the other side."

"Okay by me, homes, long's there ain't no more chainsaw bobos 'round here."

"What about Speedy? Where'd he go?" Mulroony asked.

"Last I saw him he was runnin' fast as he could down the trail," Ricky answered. "The way he can burn rubber, he's probably halfway around the lake by now."

"That chicken-ass, nappy mutha, he be all NBA," MC said.

"What the hell does that mean?" Pat asked.

"NBA, homes, No Balls at All. He's a pablo." Before Pat could say anything, MC continued, "That means he's a homo, a'aight?"

"Hell, I'll turn homo too if it means gettin' a piece like Chantrelle," Pat countered.

"Yeah, dat's some fine 'tang he got hisself."

MC's words started a new train of thought for Ricky as they started down the path towards the dock.

What's happening to Traci and Chantrelle right now?

A dark figure rose from amidst the fiery remains of the cabin, its clothes and body unharmed. Two points of red light, almost indistinguishable from the embers floating in the air, glowed where its eyes should have been. It watched the three boys moving down the path, and then turned and walked

into the woods.

"You know how to drive a boat?" MC asked Ricky, as he hammered a rock against the rusty padlock on the boathouse door.

"Yeah. We have a summer house on the lake. When I was kid we'd go out fishing all the time."

The lock came off and MC tossed it into the weeds. Ricky used his foot to push the door open, wary of any more surprises. When nothing jumped out at them, he stepped over the threshold into darkness.

A small, dirty window set high on one wall provided the only light besides the open door behind him. Vague shapes sat on the wooden walkway that outlined a large square of water. A swing-up door at the far end provided an entrance for boats.

"I'm going to try and open that door, get some more light in here."

Ricky felt his way down one side, arms out in front of him, shuffling his feet so he wouldn't trip over anything. When he reached the far end, he found a rope hanging off to one side. With a strong pull, he raised the door then tied off the rope to a nearby peg.

The added light allowed him to make out more details. Two small boats floated nearby. About fifteen feet separated him from the far side, where MC was searching through barrels and crates. Nets, engine parts, and a variety of weather-beaten crap hung on the walls and sat in piles scattered along the walkway.

Pat jumped down into the first boat, a ten or twelve-foot skiff with an outboard motor. The engine sputtered and farted as he yanked on the rip cord.

"Check and see if there's a primer button on there," Ricky shouted. "It sounds like it wants to catch."

Pat gave another hard yank and the engine turned over with a blatting roar. Black, oily smoke filled the air as the motor coughed and spat.

"Yeah!" Ricky pumped his fist in the air. "Throttle back or you'll flood it."

"What?"

Ricky started to lean over, but just then a geyser of water exploded next to the boat, cutting off his next words. He fell back as a huge, man-shaped figure emerged from the spray and grabbed Pat from the boat.

A second later, both of them disappeared into the water.

CHAPTER 12

Jeanne

Reverend Danforth emerged from behind a large pine tree, his hair a white mane surrounding his thin face. Other townspeople stepped from hiding places as well, all of them armed.

"Widow Johnson, my suspicions of you turn out to be true. Long have I believed you a witch, living outside our boundaries in these woods, communing with spirits and God knows what demons. Now I have my proof. Take them."

"Leave us alone! We're not witches or demons. We're just people, ordinary people." Traci shouted.

Jeanne looked Danforth straight on and put as much confidence as she could into her voice. "I can prove we're not witches, that we're as human as you are."

Danforth laughed, but his followers looked surprised and uneasy.

"Well then, you shall have the opportunity to make your statements. We shall return to the Johnson residence, where you will entertain us with this proof you say you possess. But be warned, anything you say or do in the presence of myself and Judge Holten," he pointed to one of the men holding a gun to Boz, "constitutes testimony before a legal court.

Danforth signaled to his men and they prodded the prisoners back in the direction they'd come. At the Johnson's house, Danforth ordered the prisoners lined up in the parlor and stripped of their borrowed clothing.

Clad in only underwear, Jeanne found herself shivering in the chill air of the Johnson's home. Five of Danforth's men stayed with the prisoners, while the others took up positions by the doors and windows.

Danforth folded his stick-like figure into Mrs. Johnson's rocking chair. "Let us start with something simple. Where is it that you come from?"

"I hope you know what you're doing," Boz whispered to Jeanne.

"Me, too," she whispered, before answering Danforth. "We are from a colony far to the south."

"Your clothing and manner of speech are most unusual." Danforth stated.

"In our towns this is how the people have begun to dress, Reverend," Jeanne told him, desperately trying to remain deferential in attitude while trying to think of the most plausible answers to his questions.

"As for our manner of speaking," she continued, "is it so unusual for people in different parts of the country to speak in different ways? Why, in England alone there are many variations of speech, are there not?"

Danforth favored her with a calculating stare. He clearly didn't like

considering the idea he could be wrong.

"Your argument is logical, at least on the surface. However, we all know the devil speaks with a syrupy tongue, for he is the father of all lies. So far you have done nothing to convince me of your innocence."

"What else do you need to know?"

Reverend Danforth smiled. "Judge Holten, please state the list of offenses relating to witchcraft that these *citizens* are accused of."

The judge cleared his throat before speaking in a clear, educated voice. "We have witness and testimony that these persons, and all their compatriots, do exhibit signs of the terrible crime of witchcraft, said offenses to include strange manner of dress and speech, consorting with known witches and sorcerers, seclusion from the properties of God-fearing citizens, refusal to enter the house of God, keeping of familiars, and practice of spells in order to bring harm to innocent peoples."

Jeanne considered the judge's words. For the most part the charges were generalities.

"I have already explained why our speech and clothing are different," Jeanne looked at the judge as she spoke, thinking he might be easier to convince.

"As for the other charges, since we just arrived here in town, we haven't yet had the opportunity to enter a house of God, but I guarantee all of us could do so without harm. Since we don't know anyone in town, we can't be accused of consorting with witches or sorcerers. We haven't said any spells, and we don't own familiars."

"You seem quite positive the Widow Johnson and her son are not in league with Satan," Danforth said.

"I am no more a witch than you are." Mrs. Johnson stepped forward and shook a long, bony finger at the two men.

"George Holten, you've known me for forty years. I lived in town from the day of my birth until I married Abraham. You know we moved here to be closer to the trees Abraham used for his carvings. I've taken meals with your family, and I was the first one there with hot food when your wife took ill. Now, can you look me in the face and honestly believe me a witch?"

Judge Holten looked down at his feet and shook his head. "No, ma'am, I cannot. But 'tis not for me to say. 'Tis Reverend Danforth who is the expert in matters of God and Satan, and 'tis he you must convince."

"Quite correct, Judge. I'm glad you remember your place. 'Tis indeed I who determines your guilt or innocence, Widow Johnson. The judge is here only as witness, and to decide on your punishment once I deliver my judgment."

"As to your statement, perhaps you care to enlighten us as to why you have not stepped foot in my church in all the years I have served this town?

Perhaps because you are...a witch?" Danforth leaned forward and shouted the last word at Gertrude Johnson.

"How dare you speak to me that way, you charlatan. You've corrupted this town more than any coven of witches ever could, killing innocent people and causing the citizens to live in fear. Well, I say this to you now, Reverend Danforth: I hope I live to see the day when you get the punishment you deserve, and those closest to you see you for what you truly are."

Danforth stepped back and pointed at Mrs. Johnson. "A curse! She tries to place a curse upon me. Silence her before her foul mouth can utter any further spells."

Two of Danforth's men stepped forward and struck the widow with their guns. She dropped to the wooden planks with a resounding thud.

"Mother," Henry cried, falling to his knees next to her. Two other soldiers grabbed him and pulled him back, his bound hands making it impossible for him to resist them.

"She didn't curse you," shouted Chantrelle. "All she did was say she hoped you get what's coming to you. You want a freakin' curse? Check dis out. Yo momma shoulda never had you. You ain't nothin' but a nasty ol' *pendejo*, and someday someone is gonna put a real bad hurtin' on you."

"Chantrelle, shut the hell up," Boz yelled.

"Both of you shut up," Jeanne shouted.

"Another witch tries to place a hex on us. I hereby find all of you guilty of witchcraft most foul. Sentence to be carried out on this day by Judge Holten."

"Reverend, I am not yet convinced that what they have done and said today constitutes witchcraft," the judge said, his tone conciliatory but firm. "I believe we need to hold a public trial, to be sure of the truth of this matter."

Jeanne couldn't believe their luck. *A public trial. Not great, but at least they won't be burning us alive today.*

Boz nudged Jeanne and nodded his head to one corner of the room, where the guards had dumped out the packs containing their clothes. A stream of smoke rose up from the pile. The smoke originated from Chantrelle's stuffed toy, the black panther Speedy had won at the carnival.

"I think we have a problem."

One of the soldiers noticed the burning toy as well. "Look! The animal."

Everyone turned towards the fire, except, Jeanne noted, Reverend Danforth. He glanced at the prisoners first, his thin lips curled in a small, tight smile, then turned and pointed at the giant plush cat.

"Move away, it comes to life! This witch," he swung his finger to Chantrelle, "has cast a spell to bring her familiar to life."

"That's impossible," Chantrelle said, "I ain't no witch."

Traci kicked her friend in the leg. "Dammit, Chantrelle, why couldn't you wish for something better, like to send us home?"

"I didn't wish for this. I don't know what's happening."

"Jeanne, I don't like this," Boz said in a soft voice.

"Me either." She tried to keep one eye on the smoke-obscured panther and the other on Danforth. Of the two, Jeanne judged Danforth to be the biggest danger.

That opinion changed a moment later when a tremendous *bang* sounded and the stuffed toy exploded in white light.

"Oh, crap," she said, taking a step behind Boz.

A live black panther stood amidst their clothes, wisps of smoke still rising from its fur. It shook its head and sneezed, then glanced back and forth, head low and tail twitching.

One of Danforth's men shouted and started to raise his gun. The panther gave a coughing growl and launched itself at the guard. The man had a second to scream before the sleek cat bit through his throat, silencing him forever.

Blood sprayed everywhere, and several of the men shrieked and ran out of the house.

"Shoot it! Shoot it, you fools," bellowed Danforth.

One of the remaining guards managed to get off a shot, but his hands were shaking so badly he missed by several feet, and only succeeded in drawing the cat's attention. The cat reached him in one giant leap, raking him with its claws and savagely tearing his face with its teeth.

"Judge, your rifle. Quickly, give me your rifle."

Holten didn't even acknowledge the reverend. He stood frozen, mouth hanging open, watching as the panther disemboweled the guard and sent stringy loops of intestine tumbling to the floor.

Danforth grabbed the gun and yanked it off the judge's back, using so much force the strap broke. He pulled back the hammer and took careful aim before firing.

The cannon sound of the gun's report deafened Jeanne, so she didn't hear the panther's cries as the lead shot entered its body. But she saw the effect. The cat flew backwards, spouting blood from a gaping wound in its chest. It made one half-hearted effort to rise, and then collapsed to the floor.

Danforth slammed the rifle back into Judge Holten's hands.

"Have you any doubts now, Judge?" Danforth's tone expressed sarcasm and triumph.

"N...none, Reverend. Call the men in. I am ready to announce sentencing."

"Wait a minute," Jeanne said. "You can't just try and sentence us here. What about a fair trial? What about a jury?"

"Quiet, witch." Danforth said, his voice low and menacing. "According to town law, I have the final say on all matters of witchcraft and Satanism, and my pronouncement of guilt is all that is required. Now, in front of duly noted

witnesses, the Judge shall apply your sentence."

Jeanne gripped Boz's hand as the Judge cleared his throat.

CHAPTER 13

Amy

Amy hugged herself as Freddy shut the door behind them. The temperature didn't seem much warmer inside the castle, but anything was better than the clammy, misty air outside. Burning torches sat in holders along both walls of the short hallway, evidence that someone had been there recently.

JD pulled one of the heavy brands from its niche. A second door, also unlocked, opened out into a large foyer, easily fifty yards long and just as wide. More torches lined the walls, the flickering light casting wavering shadows that made everything seem alive.

Except for the bodies on the cold, stone floor.

"Oh, my God," gasped Mrs. Chisholm.

Amy closed her eyes and counted to ten. When she opened them again, things were even worse. Not only were the corpses still there, but now JD and Freddy were walking towards them.

"JD, don't go near them."

"Stay back, Ames. We need to see if they're alive."

Freddy knelt by the closest body, a young man of about twenty-five. He lifted the corpse's arm, touched the wrist, and let the arm drop down.

"Cold as ice. No pulse."

They went from one to the next, checking each of the eight bodies in turn. "They're all dead."

"How did they die?" Mr. Chisholm asked.

"It looks like they were chewed by animals. Some of them have their necks torn out, and others have holes in their chests and stomachs. Reminds me of when some coyotes got hold of a few pigs last year on our farm." Freddy wiped his hands on the floor and stood up.

What kind of animal could kill eight people? Amy decided she didn't want to know.

"You notice anything else weird about the bodies?" Freddy asked.

JD's face, which only hours before still sported a summer tan, now appeared pale, and dark circles hung beneath his brown eyes. "Besides the fact they've been torn apart?"

"They're dressed like we are. Modern clothes, heavy jackets."

"Oh, hell. These are all people from the carnival, just like us." JD ran a hand through his wavy hair. "We need to find some weapons. Let's look around. Maybe there's an armory."

JD moved away from the bodies and came over to Amy. As tired and

scared as he looked, just being next to him still made her feel better.

"You're not leaving me here while you look," she said.

"I wouldn't think of it." He smiled. It wasn't much, but she loved him for making the attempt.

Half an hour of searching led them through several rooms, including a banquet hall with a table that could've held both the JV and varsity football teams, but the closest they'd come to weapons were the torches they carried.

Amy turned away from another empty room. *We'd better find something. Whatever killed those people isn't going to be put off by some torches.*

They had better luck on the second floor.

"Oh, man, you gotta come see this." Freddy waved for everyone to join him.

JD peeked inside and whistled. "An armory. I knew there had to be one."

Racks of weapons lined all four walls. Crossbows, axes, swords of all lengths and shapes, even spears and knives.

"There's no guns," Mr. Chisolm said.

"I guess firearms haven't been invented yet in this time."

Two long tables ran down the center of the room. As JD walked around one of them, he fell over something on the floor.

"Oh, shit," he said, scuttling backward on his butt.

"What is it? Are you all right?" Amy hurried over to him.

He rubbed his knee. "Yeah, I'm okay. There's another body here. He's dressed like someone out of a renaissance festival or something."

Amy peeked over the corner of the table and then yelped as the body's arm twitched. "He's alive!"

Using his foot, JD prodded the misbehaving limb. "Hello, can you hear me?"

The man on the floor opened crust-coated eyes and looked up.

"Yes," he whispered, through cracked lips.

Amy knelt next to JD, not wanting to miss a word. The rest of the group gathered behind them in a tight circle.

"They attacked last night. Surprised us. Heard someone calling for help. We thought it was the master, but himself never arrived. Instead *they* came, chasing the strangers."

"They? They, who?" JD asked.

"Werewolves." The man stopped as a hacking cough wracked his body. When his spasm subsided, he continued his story.

"First time in fifty years. Almost didna believe in them anymore. My da, he told me the stories when I was a lad. Silver, has to be silver to kill them. I came here for weapons, but 'twas too late. They killed everyone. I hid 'neath the table while they had their feast. Then they left at sunrise."

The man's head dropped back. JD felt for a pulse, shook his head.

"We're in big trouble."

Outside, the howls sounded again. Much closer.

"Everyone, grab some weapons."

Werewolves! Amy gripped handle of her short sword. *Why did we have to go to that damn carnival? Why couldn't JD have just...*

Amy stopped herself in mid-complaint. This wasn't JD's fault. That was the old Amy talking, the one who always blamed everyone else for her problems. Well, she wasn't like that anymore. They were stuck here, and she planned on helping JD get them back home, whatever it took.

Even if it means fighting werewolves.

They'd brought armloads of weapons down to the banquet hall. JD said it would be the best place to fight, because they'd have more room to use their swords without accidentally slicing each other.

Amy, Paulette, and Diane Chisholm held blades that were light enough for their arms but sharp enough to cut deep notches in the heavy wood of the banquet table.

John Chisholm, who wasn't a large man, had taken a slightly longer sword and a spear. JD and Freddy each held long, thin, double-edged swords, and had an assortment of knives tucked into their belts.

Amy found herself staring at the gleaming silver blade in her hands. *What kind of place would this be to live in?* Thinking they might be trapped forever brought an involuntary shiver.

"How you holdin' up?" JD came over and planted a quick kiss on the top of her head.

"Okay. It doesn't all seem real yet. I mean, I know it is, I accept that, but at the same time I keep thinking somehow it's not. Like I'm gonna blink and then we'll be back at the carnival, eating cotton candy and watching Freddy lose his money at the ring toss."

Amy put her blade down on the table and laid her head against JD's chest. As always, he seemed to know just what she needed, putting his arms around her and pulling her close. His lips moved against her hair as he whispered to her.

"I know what you mean. But we'll get through this. We'll figure it out, and then we can get back home."

"Promise me we're not going to die here," she said against the rough denim of his jacket. She knew he couldn't keep that promise. But she needed to hear the words.

"I promise."

She loved him for saying it, for being so brave, and she hated him for lying to her.

Almost as much as she hated herself for asking.

More howls, this time right outside the castle. A loud crash reached them from the entranceway, followed by growls and barks that echoed through the stone hallways of the castle.

"They're inside." JD grabbed his sword, took up a spot in front of her, facing the doorway.

Against her will, Amy's knees shook and a small trickle of urine escaped before she clamped her legs together.

Please, God, let us live through this.

CHAPTER 14

Boz

Boz slowly twisted his hands, his efforts to loosen his bonds hampered by the fact that Danforth's men had returned to the house and were once again watching the captives.

Judge Holten cleared his throat.

"Attention all. As Representative of the Queen's court and a duly appointed Judge of Salem, I hereby take testimony regarding the indictments of witchcraft against these prisoners. Who makes claim of witchcraft against these six?"

"I do," Danforth said in a formal tone.

"And who shall act as witness in this matter?"

A chorus of "Aye's" and "I do's" came from the gathered men.

"Let it be duly noted that on this day, October thirty, in the year sixteen ninety-two, the accused have been found guilty of witchcraft. I hereby sentence Gertrude Johnson to death by burning.

"I further sentence this stranger," Holten pointed at Chantrelle, "to a similar fate. The remaining four, having visibly consorted with witches but not evidenced in the practice of witchcraft, shall receive a sentence of death by hanging. All sentences to be carried out on the 'morrow, the thirty-first day of the month of October."

"No! We're innocent."

Jeanne's shout drove Boz to struggle harder, until a sharp pain blossomed at the back of his head, and his knees lost the power to support him.

As consciousness faded away, an image of Danforth's face, with glowing red eyes and a grinning mouth full of fangs, appeared before his eyes.

Then darkness overcame him.

When Boz came to, he found himself on the cold floor of a stone-walled jail cell. Jeanne, Traci, and Henry Johnson lay sprawled nearby. Boz crawled over to Jeanne, placed a hand against her neck, and let out a soft sigh when her pulse and breathing seemed strong and regular. After checking on the others, he glanced around the cell and found their clothes piled in one corner.

Dressed, he began examining the prison cell. Iron bars across the front were just far enough apart for him to get his arm through up to the elbow. Similar bars covered the one small window. There were no beds or toilets, just a thin layer of filthy hay strewn about the floor. The air reeked of urine and shit. He tried not to imagine what kind of bugs and parasites were crawling

around in the soiled debris.

A moan distracted him. He hurried back to Jeanne's side as she opened her eyes.

"Oh, god, that hurts," she said. Boz lifted her hand, tried to move her hair to the side. "Let me look, you might have a concussion."

"No, I'm okay," she told him. "It's just a bump. Go check on the others."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded. Hoping she was right, he brought her clothes to her and then went to the other two and patted their faces until they woke up.

"Eww, look at this place. It's filthy," Traci declared. "And my head hurts."

"If you're strong enough to bitch, you're all right," Boz told her. "Get dressed, they could be coming for us any minute."

"We need to get out of here," Jeanne said, using Boz's shoulder for support as she stood up.

"How?" Boz asked. "There's no way to break out, not through those bars. And I don't think playing sick is going work."

"There's got to be a way." Jeanne leaned her head back against the cold wall. "Oh, that feels good."

"Witchcraft," Traci startled them by saying from where she still sat on the floor.

"What about it?" Boz asked.

"That's how we'll get out. Witchcraft. Mrs. Johnson is a witch. He," she pointed to Henry, "is a witch. All one of them has to do is say a spell and we're free."

"That's right!" Boz turned away from his inspection of the lock on the cell door. "Can you do it?"

"I'm a warlock, not a witch. And," he held up his hand, "before you ask me to cast a spell, I must tell you that I can't. I've only just begun learning simple castings, words to say over herbs to help improve their healing qualities, simple prayers to our gods for good fortune. I cannot do anything to get us out of this cell."

"No, but I can," came a voice from nearby.

"Mother," cried Henry, rushing to the bars. "Where are you?"

"In the cell next to yours, I believe," Mrs. Johnson said. "The young girl is with me, but not awake yet. I can cast a spell to unlock one of these cages, but I am not strong enough to do it twice."

"Then open your door and escape," Henry said. "Come back and free us when you have regained your strength."

"No, my son. That will not work. Even if I rest first, I am not strong enough to fight the Reverend's guards. But if I open your cage, you and the other lad can defend yourselves if need be. Then you can rescue us, either

from this jail or on route to Gallow's Hill."

"But, Mother..."

Mrs. Johnson shushed him. "No buts, my son. This is how it will be. When I say the words the lock will open. Make your escape as fast and silently as you can."

Mrs. Johnson spoke a short phrase in a language Boz didn't recognize. As she said the last word, there came a click from the heavy iron lock of their cell door. With a high-pitched grating of metal-on-metal, the door swung open.

"Now hurry," the widow told them. "You must make your escape before anyone sees you."

"Where should we go?" Henry questioned his mother, as Boz herded Jeanne and Traci out of the cell.

"Seek refuge in the last place they would think to look for you. Go to the church. Do not attempt to rescue us unless you are sure of success, else you will surely find yourselves roasting beside us."

Henry nodded and turned to the others. "Follow me. I can get us to the church unseen. There is a room in the back with a window where we can watch to see when my mother and your friend are led to the Gallows Hill."

Boz looked at Jeanne. "We can't leave Chantrelle.

She shrugged. "We don't have a choice. We have to trust Henry."

Much as he hated to admit it, she was right. "Okay, let's get moving then, if we're gonna go."

"You can't just leave her." Traci turned and blocked Boz from going forward. "They'll kill her."

"Trace, the only chance we have of saving her is to get out and find some weapons. We can't take on a whole town, especially if we're tied and guarded. Now let's get the hell out of here before someone comes to check on us."

Traci looked at the cell containing Mrs. Johnson and Chantrelle, and then back at Boz. "We are going to save her, aren't we?"

"We'll do our best," Boz said. "But we can't do it from in here."

She stepped to the side, tears running down her cheeks. Boz placed a hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged away. "Leave me alone."

"Come, follow me," Henry told them. "We must hurry."

He started up the stairs. Boz followed, with Jeanne and Traci behind him. It took all of Boz's will not to look back at the two they were leaving behind. The guilt churning in his stomach increased the further up they went.

Oh, man, I hope we pull this off.

Dusk greeted them as they emerged from the jail, an unwitting but welcome abettor in their escape. A short walk brought them to the back of the church, where Henry indicated a sunken door that led down to a cellar.

"It will be cold, but it is unlikely anyone will enter during the night, as

long as we are quiet."

The basement was little more than an earthen room with some rough plank shelves holding a variety of home-canned foods and burlap sacks of potatoes and corn. With the door closed, the darkness was total, and everyone took seats on the dirt floor at the bottom of the stairs for fear of bumping into something.

After a few minutes, Traci broke the silence with a whispered question. "There's like, no windows down here. How are we going to see when they take Chantrelle and your mother out of the jail?"

"The Reverend has his quarters in the back of the church," Henry said. "In the morning he will hold a mass, which we should hear quite easily down here. Afterwards, when everyone leaves, we will make our way upstairs. There is a storage room in the back, next to the Reverend's quarters. It is from there that we will watch."

"What about weapons?" Boz asked. "We saw the last burning. No way can the four of us take on an angry mob. We'll need guns."

"I am hoping we will find weapons in the Reverend's chambers, or the church's storeroom. Otherwise we may have to accost some of the townspeople."

"Great plan, Mr. Wizard," muttered Traci. "We'd have been better off staying in our cell. I'd rather be hung than burned alive."

"We'll figure something out." Boz hoped he sounded more confident than he felt. "Now, if we're gonna be stuck here all night, let's try to sleep a little. We'll need our strength tomorrow."

Boz lay back on the dirt floor, holding Jeanne close to him, her head resting on his chest. He stroked her hair until she fell asleep. He wanted to bunch up his jacket to use as a pillow, but it was too chilly to take it off. Instead, he leaned against a sack of potatoes.

He hadn't really believed he would fall asleep, but it had been a long, hard day, and before he knew it he drifted off into a dreamless slumber.

It seemed like only minutes later that the sound of shouting overhead roused him awake. He sat up with a start, but before he could say anything, he heard Henry's hoarse whisper in the dark.

"Quiet. That is the Reverend. I think the guards have noticed our escape."

There were more shouts, and then footsteps sounded in the room directly above them, which Henry said was the kitchen.

"Bring the two witches to Gallows Hill and prepare them for the stake." Danforth's voice, hard and cold, came to them through the floor. "I will take our best men and find the other prisoners. They will not have gone far. Keep your wits about you, because it may be their intention to set their companions free."

A muffled acknowledgement, followed by the sound of several people

walking. Gradually the footsteps decreased, until one last set thumped across the floor. A door slammed.

Silence.

In the darkness, Henry whispered, "We will wait for a count of one hundred. If Reverend Danforth does not return, we will make our way to the storage room."

Boz counted in his head, wondering if the others were doing the same or just waiting for Henry to give the okay. He had reached ninety-three when Henry broke the silence.

"All right, I believe it is safe."

Boz and the others felt their way up the stairs. At the top, Henry lifted the door just enough to look out. Peeking past him, Boz saw it was still full night. After glancing both ways, Henry opened the door all the way.

"All is clear. Hurry."

They followed the young warlock around the corner of the clapboard church, up the steps, and into the sparse, neat kitchen. Moving down a short hallway. Henry approached another door, which flew open as he reached for the knob. Reverend Danforth stepped out, two armed men behind him.

"So, the serpents have entered the garden." An evil smile played across Danforth's lips. "I think hanging is too good for you. You will join your fellow Satanists on the stakes. Take them."

As the two guards moved forward, Boz lowered his shoulder and charged forward. The small, cramped hallway prevented the two men from bringing their weapons around. Boz hit the lead man and knocked him backwards into his companion, all three of them ending up in a pile on the floor, with Boz on top.

Boz yanked a gun away from one of the guards and slammed the butt end into the man's forehead, then repeated the action on the other guard. He stood and pointed the gun at Danforth.

"Don't move, asshole."

"Fools!" The Reverend's thin lips still curved up in a parody of a smile. "There is no escape for you."

He took a step forward and Boz pulled the trigger, hoping there was no safety to contend with. The rifle fired, driving the stock into Boz's shoulder so hard he dropped the gun with a cry.

Danforth flew backwards, a red stain already spreading on the front of his white shirt. He crashed into the wall and slid down, leaving a trail of blood on the rough plaster as he sank to the floor.

"Holy shit," exclaimed Traci. "You shot him."

"Billy, are you all right?" Jeanne asked.

Boz rubbed his bruised shoulder. "Jesus, that thing has a more of a kick than my old thirty-thirty."

He looked down at the Reverend. “We better get outta here before someone comes to see what the shooting was about.”

They were halfway to the door when the sound of laughter erupted behind them.

CHAPTER 15

Neil

Neil lost all track of time as he worked on the alien weapon. He tried everything he could think of to open it, including hitting it with a hammer (which brought shouts of alarm from everyone) and running a magnet over it.

Can't be molded from one solid piece, not if there're transistors or circuits or movable parts inside.

Then he had a burst of inspiration. He turned on the taser wand and tapped the live end against the back of the gun. A burst of sparks arced up, and then a small latch opened at the bottom of the grip, exposing a button inside a compartment. Neil pressed the button and the weapon opened down the lengthwise plane of the gun.

"I got it open," Neil cried out, his excitement getting the better of him.

"Sshhh," Danny cautioned him. Everyone gathered around the table except Cliff, who maintained watch by the window.

"Well, how does it work?" Gary asked.

"I said I got it open, I didn't say I figured out the whole thing. Gimme a little time," Neil told them. "And a little space to breathe, all right?"

Gary and Shawna moved away and Neil returned to his work. The guts of the weapon looked deceptively simple. A few miniature circuit boards made of some material that seemed crystalline or ceramic, a tiny block that was most likely the powerpack, a mirror-like object, and an electronic component he couldn't identify.

That's the one I've got to figure out.

There was no problem disconnecting the various parts, everything just plugged into the next unit in line.

Well, it's not a laser. There's no gem crystal to pass the light beam through. So how does it work?

Neil turned the weapon over in his hands. Shaped like a child's old-fashioned water pistol, it had an egg-shaped barrel and a slightly larger-than-comfortable handle.

Makes sense, since the aliens' hands are longer than ours and have an extra finger.

The trigger was a squeeze mechanism on the front of the handle, right where you'd expect it to be, and the gun had a small dial on the back that you pulled out and turned. Etched on the dial were a series of indecipherable figures.

Probably to focus the beam or change the intensity.

Gary sat down across from him, looking at his own weapon. "Hey, I'm

like Captain Kirk with his disrupter."

"The Klingons used disrupters. Kirk used a phaser." Cliff corrected him. "And be careful you don't shoot someone."

"Whatever. I got me a real ray gun. When this is over I'm gonna be able to do all sorts of shit with this. Maybe I'll sell it for a million dollars."

Neil ignored them. Gary's disrupter comment echoed in his head and made him look at the inside of the gun again.

That mirror object, it almost looks like a tiny satellite dish. And that block in front of the circuit boards? Could it be...?

"That's it! I know how it works."

Once more, everyone gathered around him, even Cliff.

"It really is a disrupter. It works on sound waves. This piece is the power pack, this thing is the speaker, and this is the focusing device."

"So how does it kill people?" Shawna asked. "I've never heard of sound waves melting someone."

"Have you ever cooked with a microwave? It's simple cellular degeneration. The sound waves break down the cell walls. Now we have to see if the wavelength is specific for humans or if we can use their own weapons against them."

Neil picked up the other half of the casing and put the two pieces together. Once he closed the latch the seam disappeared.

"Everybody stand back, I haven't changed the setting on this. I'm assuming it wasn't set to destroy a building, but who knows?"

Neil aimed the gun at one of the alien corpses. He depressed the trigger and the gun hummed in his hand like a bass speaker playing at full volume. A coruscating line of energy flashed out and reduced the alien to a skeleton.

"It works!" Neil let go of the trigger.

"So what's the next step?" Cliff asked him. "Even with three guns, we can't do much against hundreds of aliens, not to mention the thousands more spread across the country, or maybe the world."

"Yes, we can." Neil grew more excited as he described his idea. "All we have to do is get to the school. We can use the oscilloscope in the Physics lab to figure out the wavelength this thing uses, and then we can reprogram the school's satellite dish and turn it into a weapon. We shoot down the alien ships, invasion over."

"One problem," Gary said. "How do we get to the school without being killed?"

"I think I can take care of that," Danny said. "Neil, does your laptop have a wireless hookup?"

"Yeah."

"If I can get on the 'net, I can hack into the city's Utility files and pull up the sewer grids. We can travel underground where the aliens can't see us."

Ten minutes later, Danny had the diagrams printed out.

As they prepared to leave, Neil stopped. “What about Josie? We can’t leave her here.”

“Dude, we can’t take her. How are we gonna carry her through those tunnels?” Gary shook his head. “I ain’t risking my life for your comatose girlfriend.”

Neil rounded on the youth. “Hey, we risked our lives for you two. You’ll do what we say or you can leave right now. See how far you get.”

Gary started to respond but Shawna put her hand on his arm. “Gary, I don’t want to go out there alone. They know what they’re doing.”

“Fine. But you still don’t know how we can carry her, do you, genius?”

“We’ll make a travois,” Cliff said.

“A what?” Gary asked.

“A travois. We place her on top of a comforter, tie some ropes to it, then two people each grab an end and we drag her along.”

“That’s not a real travois,” Danny commented. “For a real one you would...”

“I’m improvising, okay? Let’s just get it done and get out of here before it’s too late.”

~

An hour and a half and one wrong turn later, Neil pushed open a manhole cover in the street outside the school, disrupter in one hand and a flashlight in the other.

“Looks clear,” he whispered, glancing around the parking area.

Cliff and Danny exited next, hauling Josie up between them in her makeshift comforter-sling. From there they made their way to back of the school, where Neil used his gun on a door.

They hurried down the hall to the Physics lab. Cliff and Danny placed Josie in a corner and then joined Neil.

“So, what’s next?” Cliff asked.

“We have to figure out a way to hook a transmitter to the satellite television system. I’m hoping the wiring diagrams are in Doctor Tanaka’s office. I know he’s got a short wave radio there, so we can set that up and see if we can contact anyone else, or maybe the military.”

“You guys get the radio. Shawna and I will search the building to see if anyone’s here.” Gary stepped into the hallway and then flew backwards as a six-fingered hand struck him in the chest. Before anyone could react, the alien grabbed Shawna and pulled her out of the room, her screams echoing off the cinderblock walls.

“C’mon, we can’t let it get away.” Neil ran out the door, Cliff and Gary behind him.

Neil expected to see the alien far down the hallway. He wasn't prepared for what they found instead.

The creature had Shawna pinned to a wall, holding her there with one hand while it stabbed at her stomach with an enormous, phallus-like organ that extended out from beneath its kilt. Blood gushed down her abdomen and legs. A second alien stood nearby.

"Shawna!" Gary opened fire with his disruptor. His shot went wild, hitting the ceiling. The alien violating Shawna withdrew itself and she fell to the floor. Before the aliens could reach for their weapons, Neil fired, and next to him Cliff did the same. Both shots hit their marks, enveloping the creatures in a field of blazing sonic energy. A moment later, two gooey skeletons dropped to the ground.

A sobbing Gary knelt beside Shawna. "She's still alive."

"Danny, help him get her to the lab with Josie, and see if you can stop the bleeding. Cliff and I will go see if Tanaka or someone else is around."

Neil motioned for Cliff to follow him. There was no way Shawna was going to live. Even from several feet away he'd been able to see her internal organs through the gaping hole in her gut. He wasn't a biologist, but he knew the shit and bacteria of her own digestive system were already poisoning her. He had no desire to be there when Gary came to the same realization.

They reached Doctor Yoshi Tanaka's small office without encountering any other aliens. Moving past the professor's desk, Neil went to grab the short wave radio off a shelf and found Tanaka lying on the floor, his left leg covered in a blood-soaked cloth. He wore a heavy coat over flannel pajamas.

"Doctor Tanaka! What happened?"

Neil and Cliff helped him into a more comfortable reclining position against a cabinet. In a hoarse but strong voice, the teacher told them his story.

"I was hiding in my basement when the first attack came. There was a huge explosion and the house collapsed over me. When I came to, my leg was bleeding badly. I bandaged it with some rags and crawled out through the remains of the basement door. That's when I saw the aliens."

"Let me guess. They were going from house to house, collecting people, biting them, right?" Neil asked.

"Yes. I hid in my neighbor's shed until they went past. Then I made my way in the opposite direction. I found a car with the keys still in it and drove here, intending to set up the short wave radio, but I must have passed out."

"We think we've figured out how to destroy the aliens, but we need your help. We have to adjust the satellite dish equipment so it can transmit instead of receive."

Neil explained what had happened to them, and how he'd figured out the secret of the aliens' weapons.

"Remarkable. But your work isn't done. I'm too weak to set up the

equipment. You and your friends will have to be my hands. Help me to the lab and we'll get started."

The professor couldn't walk, but Cliff solved the problem by putting him in his office chair, short wave radio on his lap, and wheeling him down to the lab, while Neil acted as bodyguard.

"Shawna's dead," Danny told them. "She didn't last five minutes. Gary's just sitting with her. He's like, totally out of it."

"Damn," Neil whispered. *I'd be useless too if it was Josie lying dead on the floor.*

Tanaka turned on the radio and, faster than they'd expected, managed to make contact with a military base less than two hundred miles away. He informed them of their plan, and had them stand by to monitor the results. While he did that, Neil set up an oscilloscope on a table at the back of the room and prepared to record the wavelength of the gun as it fired.

Tanaka glanced at Neil, his dark eyes crinkled in concentration. "As soon as you have the wavelength determined, we can link the transmitter to the dish. The only problem will be aiming it. It turns too slow to track a ship moving across the sky."

"How about if we make the beam wider? We'll have to jack up the power, but I think we can do that. And we'll only target the stationary ships, the motherships."

"Excellent idea, Neil. If this works, the Army will forward the information to military bases around the world."

Tanaka returned to the satellite operations manual in his lap. "Have you finished with the oscilloscope?"

"Yes." He brought over the frequency information. "I ran the gun on the cellular disruption setting. That way the ships won't be destroyed, and we can study the aliens' technology."

The professor rubbed his chin. "Hmm. I think we should know both frequencies, in case the disruptor setting doesn't penetrate the ships' hulls or shielding. Also, it would be very bad to have hundreds of enormous spaceships crashing to the ground. This way, we can salvage a few of them and destroy the rest."

"Okay." Neil returned to the back of the lab. He twisted the setting on the back of the gun, and then aimed it at a section of wall.

"Watch out, everyone." The resulting beam destroyed a four-foot section of cement, opening a hole into the next room. Pellets of cement, plaster, and wood exploded in all directions, peppering Neil and the equipment on the table.

"Got it," he called out, once the noise died down.

He read off the numbers on the oscilloscope's LED screen. Tanaka gave him a thumbs-up, added the information to the message he'd prepared, and

programmed it into the laptop controlling the transmitter.

"All right, we're ready to test the dish now."

"How are you going to decide where to aim it?" Cliff asked.

Tanaka kept his eyes on the controls while answering. "We'll set up a remote targeting device. Because we will be keeping the beam as wide as possible, we won't have to be as precise in our targeting. In fact, we may be able to strike at more than one vessel at a time, if they are close enough together."

Tanaka ran a hand through his short, salt and pepper hair. "We will fire on one ship using the disruptor setting, to see if it works, and then switch to the more destructive mode and fire on as many different vessels as we can before the smaller ships destroy our satellite dish."

Danny sat back and said, "What about us? When they start firing at the dish, this building will be leveled, with us in it."

"The basement should offer some protection from attack. It was originally designed as an emergency shelter. That is the best we can do under these circumstances."

"How are we going to target the ships, and use the short wave, if we're in the basement?" Neil asked.

Tanaka looked at his prize student, his coal-black eyes unblinking. "I am going to stay behind and transmit the data from here, while you control the satellite from the basement."

"No!" Neil cringed inside at the thought of his teacher sacrificing himself, but the man's logic was inescapable.

"We can't leave you here. We'll carry you down to the basement. There's no need for us to watch. We can transmit the data and tell the Army to monitor what happens. That will be good enough."

Tanaka patted Neil's leg. "Neil, you've been very brave and logical up until now. You led these people here. You came up with the idea that could very well save our world. Don't throw it all away for the life of one old man."

Tanaka tapped the blood-soaked bandage covering his leg. "The odds of my surviving this injury are not good. I can feel myself growing weak from blood loss. If I am going to die, I want to die in the best way possible, helping my country and my world. My ancestors would be proud. Now, finish programming the laptop and get yourselves to the basement."

Neil started to object once more, but Tanaka shushed him. "No more speaking of this. I have made my decision. Hurry, or we may lose our window of opportunity."

Neil ducked his head down so no one would see his tears. He entered the final data into the laptop, the screen blurring in front of his eyes.

"Okay, it's done. Let's go." Neil didn't even say goodbye to Tanaka, knowing if he opened his mouth he'd either start crying or yell at the

professor for committing suicide.

"What about Gary?" Cliff asked. "We can't carry Josie and him both."

"I'm coming," Gary said in a hoarse, low voice. "Shawna would hate me if I stayed here and died."

He bent down on one knee and gently kissed her blood-splattered cheek. He whispered something in her ear, which Neil assumed was a final goodbye.

Gary started to get up, then froze.

"I think she's still alive."

CHAPTER 16

Ricky

"It's him! It's..." Pat's words ended as the chainsaw killer slammed him against the wood of the platform. Ricky started towards him, peripherally aware of MC heading their way from the other side of the boathouse.

Ricky hadn't even covered ten feet when the maniac, still standing in water over his knees, manhandled the boat around and pushed it directly into Pat's chest. Pat tried to keep it away, but his strength was no match for the giant's.

Pat screamed again, long and loud, and the sound of the boat's motor changed, stuttering and then dying out.

The killer pushed the boat out of the way and grabbed Pat by the shirtfront. Pat started punching and kicking but it didn't even faze the massive fiend. With one swing of his thigh-sized arms, the hulking figure tossed Mulroony out of the water and directly into Ricky, who crashed to the ground beneath his friend.

"Get up, get up!" Ricky cried, fighting to get free. He knew he should check on Pat, but he was more concerned about the killer coming after them.

MC stepped in front of them, swinging an oar at the killer's head. With a sound like a baseball player connecting for a home run, the oar broke on the madman's skull.

The giant went under the surface for a moment, then rose up and charged through the shallow, frigid water, heading for the slime-covered boat ramp. To Ricky's surprise, MC ran towards their attacker instead of away.

At the top of the ramp, MC picked up a heavy, triangular boat anchor. Like a cowboy with a lasso, he swung the chain around and let go. The steel anchor sailed through the air and embedded itself in the killer's chest with a wet crunch. The force of the blow sent the maniac into the water, and MC started pulling back on the chain, dragging the kicking and twitching body up the slick cement.

"He's still alive," Ricky said, wondering if they'd ever be able to kill it, or if it would just keep coming back, no matter what they did to it.

"I'll kill the chicken head," MC growled. He dragged the man-creature all the way out of the water. The monster pushed back with its massive legs and arms, but MC wrapped the chain around a nearby dock pillar. Then he picked up a wicked-looking, sickle-shaped knife from the ground.

"Here you go, fuckface, see if you live through this."

With one massive swing, MC drove the wide blade into the giant's neck. Flesh parted and the scar-faced head tumbled down into the water, leaving a

path of black, gooey liquid behind it.

MC dropped the blade to the ground. “Showed that ankle-grabbin’...”

Without warning, the air shimmered and the boathouse disappeared.

“...donut punchin’...What the...?”

They stood on a wooden platform over blue-painted plaster of Paris. A wax figure lay at MC’s feet, dressed in flannels and missing its head. A door set into one cheap plywood wall had an electric “Exit” sign over it.

Ricky looked around. “Holy shit. We’re back at the carnival.”

On the floor, Mulroony moaned.

“You okay, dude?” Ricky knelt down next to him.

“My legs hurt like a mother.”

“Let me see.” Ricky glanced at the wounds, afraid of what he’d find. The jeans were torn, and a series of crisscross cuts covered Mulroony’s thighs, bloody but not deep.

“Bro, you got fuckin’ lucky. The motor must have died before the prop could do much damage. MC, gimme your t-shirt.”

Ricky tore the shirt into two makeshift bandages and tied them around the wounds.

“Man, am I glad to see you guys.” Speedy emerged from behind a group of fake trees in one corner of the room.

“Where the hell you been, peckerwood?” MC asked.

“Lost, man. When I saw ol’ stitch face coming with that chainsaw, I ran. Then I got all turned around. Ain’t never been in no woods before. Next thing I know, I’m standing in a bunch of plastic trees.”

“You missed all the action, Sally-boy,” MC said, taking a half-hearted swing at Speedy’s head.

Speedy ducked and laughed. “I’d rather be a Sally than dead.”

“Save it for later, guys. Let’s get the hell outta here.” Ricky told them, heading for the exit.

“I’m up wit’ dat, homey,” MC said. “Wait’ll everybody hears what we been up to.”

CHAPTER 17

Boz

"Ho, and you think me that easy to kill?"

Boz took a step back as Danforth pushed himself to his feet and held out his arms. Aside from the blood, the minister appeared unhurt.

"Demon," cried Henry, pointing at the Reverend.

"Very astute, Mr. Johnson." Danforth's features blurred and his body expanded. The middle-aged, white-haired preacher disappeared, replaced by an eight-foot, four hundred-pound creature with red skin, four horns, and glowing red eyes.

The rotten-egg odor of burning sulfur filled the air in a thick miasma so awful that Traci fell to her knees and puked.

The demon reached out and grabbed Henry by the shoulders, drawing him forward. It gripped the young man's arms and pulled in one quick motion, like two people sharing a wishbone at Thanksgiving. The young warlock's limbs separated from his body with a wet tearing sound, and blood fountained from the wounds.

Henry screamed, a high-pitched wail that went on and on. He collapsed to the floor, his body twitching and his head whipping back and forth as if trying to comprehend the spurting stumps where his arms used to be.

It seemed he might go on screaming until he bled to death, but the demon drove its massive foot into Henry's chest, ending the anguished cries. The contents of his body cavity exploded outward in a spray of blood and pulped organs that splattered the walls in a grotesque parody of modern art.

"Run," Boz shouted, grabbing Jeanne by one hand and using his other to pick Traci up from the floor and propel her forward. They ducked into the first doorway they came to, which opened into the church.

Behind them, the demon's roaring laughter shook the plaster walls of the hallway.

They emerged from an alcove behind the altar. Boz pulled Jeanne along as he sprinted down the altar steps and through the aisle between the wooden pews, heading for the double doors at the far end. But when they got there, he found them locked and chained.

"Dammit! Danforth set this up ahead of time. He must have known we were downstairs."

"Now what?" Jeanne asked.

A crash from the other side of the church answered her, as the Danforth demon kicked the alcove door off its hinges and stepped onto the altar.

The demon's rough bellow echoed through the church. "I will pull your

entrails from your bodies and strangle you with them."

It crossed the altar in two long strides, its vile, sulfurous fumes preceding it.

"Try to go around it and get out the way we came in. I'll distract it." Boz ran up a side aisle, under the stained glass windows that lined the walls of the church. Jeanne and Traci headed in the opposite direction, along the other wall, heading for the altar.

The demon turned towards the girls and moved to intercept them. Boz saw they wouldn't make it. He grabbed the first thing he could find, a silver candle holder, and threw it at the demon, striking the back of the creature's oversized head.

"Fool! Silver cannot hurt me." The demon changed direction, tossed aside two heavy, wooden pews as if they weighed nothing, and headed towards Boz.

Boz's first thought had been to meet it head on, like he would on the football field, but when he saw the creature's strength he realized he couldn't let it get a good grip on him.

As the monster closed the gap between them, Boz looked around for something, *anything,* to use as a weapon. That's when the three-foot wooden crucifix hanging on the wall caught his eye. He pulled it down and swung all in one motion, barely deflecting the demon's clawed hand as it attempted to grab him. Tiny bolts of lightning arced out from the point where wood and demonic flesh touched.

The force of the impact sent Boz sprawling to the floor, almost losing his grip on the cross in the process. As he struggled to his feet, the demon stumbled to the right and smashed into a pew, crushing it. A little slower than before, Danforth extricated itself from the splintered wood and prepared to charge again.

Boz felt a surge of hope when he noticed a smoking burn mark on the creature's arm where the cross had struck it.

The Danforth demon shouted something in another language and moved towards Boz, arms out, claws extended, and fanged mouth wide open.

Boz raised the cross, holding his ground as the demon approached. At the last second he moved to the left, bringing the cross back and then forward again in a baseball swing. He put every ounce of his strength into it, and managed to drive one arm of the "T" into the center of the creature's ribcage.

The heavy wood broke in Boz's hands. Splinters embedded themselves into his palms. With a shout, he dropped the piece of wood that remained.

The Danforth demon stumbled to one knee and then fell to its side, the rest of the cross protruding at an angle from its chest. Bluish-white flames erupted around the wound and spread rapidly across the demon's torso, engulfing it in a fiery blaze.

Boz put his hands up to shield his eyes from the blinding glow. There was no heat, only the vision-torturing brightness. As fast as it started, the glare subsided, leaving a smoking, desiccated corpse behind, head and limbs remarkably unharmed. The creature's face held the features of both Danforth and the demon, as if superimposed over each other.

Only when the charred body collapsed in on itself, allowing the head to roll away, did Boz feel confident the demon was dead.

"Billy, are you all right?" Jeanne came running over to him, Traci behind her.

"Yeah, I'm okay. But we've to reach Gallows Hill before they kill Chantrelle and Mrs. Johnson."

"I can help with that." Judge Holton stood by the altar, several guards with him.

"We were waiting outside at the Reverend's orders. When we heard the noise, we entered from the back and witnessed the demon's death. It appears we have been led astray by the very devil we sought to protect ourselves from. There is no way we can bring back the innocents we have killed, but we can save two today. Come, I will take you to the Hill."

The judge and his men led them through the streets to the outskirts of town. Their arrival at Gallows Hill created quite a disturbance, especially when Holton announced Danforth had actually been a demon.

"Free the prisoners," he called to the men who stood ready to pile kindling under Chantrelle and Mrs. Johnson.

"What proof have you that Danforth was in league with Satan?" shouted one man, who already held a burning torch.

"Here's your proof." Boz held up the creature's head, its dual human and demonic nature evident.

Amid murmurs and gasps, the crowd parted before them and made no effort to interfere as Holton's men freed the two women.

"Traci!" Chantrelle rushed forward and threw her arms around her friend. "Those *bastardos* was gonna burn me."

Boz approached the old woman whose son had given his life to save them all.

"Mrs. Johnson, I..."

Before he could finish, her hawkish visage wavered and disappeared. When his vision returned to normal, he found himself surrounded by cheap plastic figures and walls with trees and houses painted on them.

Chantrelle fell to the floor, sobbing. Traci bent down to comfort her while Boz grabbed Jeanne and hugged her so tight she found herself gasping for air.

"We have to find the others," Boz said. "I don't think this is over yet."

CHAPTER 18

Neil

Much as Neil didn't want to believe it, there was no denying the movement of Shawna's chest. His surprise momentarily overrode his consideration for Gary's feelings. "No way she's alive. No one could live through that."

Gary seemed oblivious to the harshness of Neil's words. "She's breathing. That means she's alive."

Shawna's abdomen heaved up and down, expanding and contracting as if she'd just run a marathon. Cliff bent down and placed his head next to her mouth. "I don't hear anything."

Neil touched him on the shoulder. "I think we should get away from her."

The others backed away except for Gary, who remained crouched over his girlfriend's body.

"No, she's alive. Shawna, wake up, wake up." He started pounding on her chest. Whether he was trying some awkward type of CPR or if he was just in hysterics, Neil wasn't sure. Either way, the pounding seemed to make her stomach swell even more.

"Gary, get the hell away from her," Neil shouted, but it was too late. Shawna's abdomen burst open, sending blood and flesh in all directions.

A two-foot long miniature alien emerged from inside the cavity. Whatever Gary had been about to say turned to a strangled scream as the infant leaped up and clamped its dog-like jaws around Gary's neck. It began chewing, holding itself in place with its needle-like claws.

Gary went rigid and toppled backwards. Blood sprayed everywhere as the alien's teeth ground through veins and arteries.

"Kill it, kill it!" Cliff shouted.

Neil pulled out his gun and tried to aim at the creature. "I can't shoot. I'll hit Gary."

"Gary's dead. Just shoot the damn thing before it gets away."

"Wait," came Tanaka's voice. "The setting. Make sure you have the gun set correctly or you'll destroy the lab."

Neil fumbled with the dial, willing his hands to stop shaking and work correctly. The knob finally clicked into place and he prayed he'd turned it in the right direction.

"Shoot it!" Danny screamed, his voice an octave higher than normal.

Neil pressed the trigger. The beam consumed Gary and his attacker in sickly-colored brilliance. Human and alien flesh dissolved away, leaving nothing behind but two skeletons, the alien's open snout still wedged under

Gary's jawbone.

A squishing sound from Shawna's corpse attracted Neil's attention. Another alien offspring had pulled itself halfway out of Shawna's chest. He fired again, burning away Shawna's body and everything inside it.

"I think we know why the aliens are collecting bodies," Danny whispered, indicating the five tiny skeletons within Shawna's ribcage.

"We need to start killing these things," Neil said. His whole body trembled, but he tried to ignore it. "You guys bring Josie, I'll make sure the hallway is clear."

"Go with God, Neil," Doctor Tanaka called from his seat by one of the large windows.

Neil paused at the door of the lab. "You, too." He waited until he was around the corner before wiping the tears from his eyes.

Down in the basement, Cliff and Danny made a place for Josie in one corner of the room while Neil opened the laptop and readied the satellite control program. Cliff set down a walkie-talkie he had found in the Physics storeroom and turned it on. Tanaka had its twin.

"Are you ready?" The teacher's voice, small and tinny, came over the speaker.

"Ready," Neil said. As Tanaka read off the estimated coordinates, Neil entered them into the targeting program, then hit the enter key. The target was one of the motherships stationed over the river along the western edge of town.

"Fingers crossed," Cliff murmured.

A low, humming vibration reached them, and Neil took it as evidence the transmitter was working.

"Boys, I'm beginning my broadcast now. The Army and anyone else with a short wave will be able to hear us."

The three friends listened as Tanaka, his voice sounding weak but calm and professional, began describing the last chance for humanity's survival as if it were no more important than a physics lesson.

"So, I have just seen the beam released by the dish. It is much brighter than the hand weapons, a yellowish-green streak of rotten lightening flashing across the sky. Our coordinates were nearly perfect. The beam struck the alien ship on the left side. From here, it appeared as if the ship was enveloped in plasma, the energy field spreading out from the initial point of contact. If the ship has any type of protective shield, I could not see it.

"This first strike used the cellular disrupter setting. The ship is still stationary. There doesn't seem to have been any effect, no obvious marks on the hull. Many of the smaller ships have begun approaching it, and.... wait, something is happening..." The teacher paused and then began again.

"The ship is starting to waver. The front end is dipping down, and...it is

falling out of the sky! The ship is crashing into the river. Waves of water have obscured my view. The houses and fields nearby are flooded." Tanaka's voice strengthened as he grew more excited.

"I can see the ship again. At least one third of it is buried in the ground. The smaller ships are buzzing around like hornets now. Boys, I think you had better hurry and reset the frequency to the destruct mode, and shift the focus to the next target. I fear there is not much time before we are attacked."

Danny and Cliff shouted and high-fived each other. Neil, a huge grin on his face that was completely at odds with the tears streaming from his eyes, was too busy recalibrating the dish to celebrate. As soon as he had the dish aimed, he hit the firing control. This time the beam covered a wider area, targeting two, possibly three ships, they couldn't be sure.

"Shut up, shut up," he yelled at the others, trying to hear Tanaka's commentary. Danny and Cliff quieted down and returned to their seats around the tiny receiver.

"...the second strike completely encompassed two ships, and partially impacted a third. I believe the aliens turned on their defensive shields, because this time I saw, just for an instant, a reddish outline around each ship as the beam enveloped them, but that has quickly disappeared. Now the ships are breaking up. No explosions, they're simply disintegrating. The two direct hits are now nothing more than tiny pieces of metal falling to the ground.

"The third ship has not fared much better. Half its hull is gone. There's a gaping hole, where I can see twists of energy arcing back and forth. Now that ship too is falling. It's going to crash in the farmlands just outside of town. Oh, the explosion was tremendous! The vibration felt like an earthquake, even though the crash site had to be two miles away."

In the basement, Neil held onto the walkie-talkie as all around them walls shook, objects toppled from shelves, and glass shattered.

When the rumbling faded, they could hear Tanaka's voice again, the joy in it evident even though distorted by the tiny speaker.

"The experiment is a success; I repeat, the experiment is a success. We can destroy these invaders from space."

"Quick, enter the third target," Danny said, grinning from ear to ear. Neil waited for the coordinates, but Tanaka's voice delivered a different message.

"Boys, find a safe place and take cover. The small attack ships have massed and are heading this way."

"Okay, you heard him, that's it. Let's hope we live through this," Neil said. He ran over to where Josie's body lay on its comforters. He grabbed an end and started dragging her across the floor.

They seated themselves under a double-wide doorframe, hoping it would offer the best protection if the ceiling collapsed. The three of them huddled close together, Josie's body on the floor between them. They pulled one of the

comforters from underneath her and draped it over themselves, unconsciously mimicking little boys hiding under the bedcovers.

Yoshi Tanaka continued to transmit his observations. "They've apparently identified the satellite dish as the source of the attack and they're coming this way. They're very fast. Now the first shots have been fired."

The basement floor bucked as if alive, accompanied by a roaring sound that tore through the building.

"The dish is gone. The ships are turning back for another run...I've just received word the Army is already working on a more powerful version of our weapon, boys...now the ships are firing again, and..."

A tremendous explosion drowned out the radio. Chunks of plaster fell from the ceiling, and dust filled the air. A second wall-shaking blast followed moments later, but Neil couldn't hear it, only feel its effects as the building collapsed around them. He closed his eyes, waiting for death to take him.

When nothing else happened, he slowly opened his eyes again. Danny and Cliff still sat across from him; Josie still lay on the ground between them. Only now, no comforters covered them, and they were no longer in the school basement. Instead, seven-foot tall models of space aliens stood around them, and cheap plaster of Paris rubble covered the floor.

To their left, a large, red Exit sign glowed over a plain wooden door.

"What... what happened?" Cliff asked. Danny patted himself, a smile appearing on his thin face.

"It's over," Neil said. "We're back home."

"Does that mean everyone who died is alive again?" Danny asked.

"I don't think so. Look over there," Cliff said, pointing across the room. On the floor next to a cheap folding chair lay the body of Doctor Tanaka, a large piece of glass embedded in his chest. One hand gripped a toy walkie-talkie.

Neil hurried to the professor's body. He touched the wrist, feeling for a pulse. The flesh was warm but lifeless.

"I guess whoever dies on the other side dies over here, too."

Cliff placed a hand on Neil's shoulder. "Hey, man, I'm sorry."

Neil nodded, not trusting himself to say anything.

"What's going on? Where am I?" came a familiar voice from behind them.

"Josie! You're alive!" Neil wrapped his arms around her. Cliff and Danny joined them in a group hug.

"I won't be if you don't let go of me. The last thing I remember is that alien bursting into the attic. What happened? How did we end up back here?"

"It's a long story," Danny laughed. "And our boy Neil is the hero."

As Josie turned to Neil, a questioning look on her face, Neil glanced down at Tanaka's body.

"No, I'm not. He was the real hero. He gave up his life for his world."

Cliff opened the exit door and they left the room, leaving behind the body of a professor who would be only one among hundreds of people reported missing the next day.

CHAPTER 19

Amy

When the werewolves charged through the entrance to the banquet hall, they weren't what Amy had expected. As large as St. Bernards, although less hairy, they seemed a mixture of more than just wolf and human.

The lycanthropes' wide, gaping snouts sported rows of huge teeth, and their hand-shaped front paws ended in razor-sharp claws easily two inches long. The lean, muscular bodies moved with a chimp-like gait as they ran, as if their hind legs were too long and too large. The reason for this became obvious when they stood up in hunched fashion, again more simian than human.

The lead were-beast paused, darting its huge wolf-head back and forth. Looking into the thing's amber eyes, Amy realized something more than a brute animal stood before her.

"Don't let them bite you," JD shouted. "It's the bite that carries the disease."

Amy moaned low in her throat, the kind of whimper she imagined a rabbit would make as it prepared to dash past a fox. Next to her, Paulette uttered a similar sound.

The pack, numbering about twelve, gathered behind their leader, a grey and black monster. The others ranged in color from pure black to snow white, although most were the typical brown and grey of wild wolves. They stood motionless for a moment, then fell to all fours and charged.

The initial moments of the attack were a kaleidoscope of screams, flashing blades, and far too many teeth and claws. Amy, Paulette, and Mrs. Chisholm stayed behind the men, their backs against the table, while JD, Freddy, and Mr. Chisholm faced outward in a semi-circle.

The first wolves to throw themselves at the humans earned slashing cuts from JD's and Freddy's swords. The silver weapons had an immediate effect. Smoke rose from injured flesh, and the werewolves howled in agony as they retreated.

A black wolf leaped forward and Mr. Chisholm poked at it with his spear. The silver-coated point stabbed into the creature's eye socket. With a bark of pain, the wolf fell backwards, rolling on the ground. Dark, smoldering blood ran out of the ruined orb.

"We can hurt them," JD cried, his brown hair tousled and matted with sweat. "The silver is poison to them."

As if realizing they couldn't attack in ones and twos, the remaining werewolves charged en masse, bounding forward with frightening speed.

"Oh, God!" Mrs. Chisholm dropped her blade and ran for the wide staircase across the room.

"Come back," Paulette screamed, as two werewolves went after the older woman.

"Diane," Mr. Chisholm shouted. He took off in pursuit of his wife.

"No, don't break ranks!" JD grabbed Freddy and pulled him closer. The werewolves surged forward again, and the two friends fought for their lives against the onslaught.

As if in a dream, Amy stepped back, intending to go after the older woman, but Paulette grabbed her arm. "Don't! You'll be killed."

Amy stopped, thoughts of dying and danger and JD possibly risking his life to save her freezing her in her tracks.

Shit. This is too fucked up. I can't just stand here.

For a brief moment, everything went red, and her pulse pounded in her head. A growl escaped from her throat. Pulling free from Paulette's hand, she moved forward, next to JD.

She stabbed out at a wolf, impaling it on her blade. She hung on with all her strength as the creature slid backwards, spouting smoke and blood from the gaping hole in its throat. JD glanced at her, opened his mouth.

"Don't say a word," she told him.

A claw flashed forward, raking across JD's arm. His fight to keep from being disemboweled left him too busy to argue with her.

She jabbed again, cutting deep into a werewolf's paw as it swung at her, nearly severing the appendage. The wolf dropped back and another took its place. It grabbed her left arm, its claws piercing her flesh through her coat. With a scream, she dropped her blade and fell to her knees.

The creature's enormous muzzle loomed over her, mouth open, teeth bared, vile-smelling saliva spilling off its pink tongue. The massive head came closer, until she couldn't see anything else.

Time seemed to stop as she waited for the pain.

Just before the jaws reached her throat, the werewolf paused. A second later, the creature let go of her arm as its head fell into her lap.

"Ugh!" She swatted the head off her legs and onto the floor. The headless body, burning fluids spouting from the stump of its neck, toppled backwards. Amy looked up, found Paulette standing there, a bloody sword in her hands and a stunned look in her eyes.

"Thank you," Amy whispered, retrieving her knife and rising unsteadily to her feet.

Paulette just nodded. Amy wanted to say more but JD shouted and she turned in time to thrust her knife directly into the clutching paw of a werewolf. The monster jerked away, pulling the blade from her hand.

She stepped back, desperately feeling behind her for another weapon. One

hand found a sword blade and she grabbed it, cutting her palm in the process. Next to her, JD stabbed at a gray and black werewolf, but his sword missed its mark as his left knee gave out and he stumbled to the side. The wolf buried its claws in the heavy material of JD's jacket and lunged forward with a wide-open mouth.

Amy gripped the sword handle with both hands and chopped at the creature's arm. The blade went clean through skin and bone, severing the limb just below the shoulder. The wolf-beast howled and turned towards her. She swung again, opening a wide gash on its muzzle. The wolf abandoned its attack and ran away. On the floor, the hairy arm convulsed once and then relaxed.

Amy brought her sword up, ready for the next attacker.

No werewolves remained standing.

She had time for one quick thought—*We won*—before Freddy pointed across the room and gasped, "The Chisholms!"

JD and Freddy ran across the room. Amy grabbed Paulette and they followed, struggling to keep their balance in the slick, steaming puddles of blood. Odiferous fumes filled the air from the supernatural corpses smoldering on the floor.

Mrs. Chisholm lay at the bottom of the staircase with a huge, gaping hole just below her rib cage. A dead werewolf rested on top of her, its snout buried in her belly. Pieces of stomach, intestine, and other organs hung from the wound. Mr. Chisholm's spear protruded from the werewolf's back.

A second dead lycanthrope leaned against the wall, a silver knife stuck in its eye. Mr. Chisholm lay nearby, eyes closed, arms outstretched towards his wife. An enormous chunk of his leg was missing and a pool of blood from the severed femoral artery stained the floor around him.

Sudden awareness of her own mortality hit Amy and she fell to her knees, unmindful of the bloody floor. She covered her face with her hands, sobbing, choking, gasping for breath against the tightness in her chest.

"Amy! What's the matter? Are you hurt?" JD knelt beside her, grabbed her wrists and pulled her hands away from her face.

"That could be us. That could be me with my chest opened like a botched heart surgery, and you lying there, bleeding to death trying to save me. I know I should be feeling sorry for them, but all I can think about is how I'm glad it's not us."

"Hey, it's all right." JD held her close, rocking her gently. "You're glad to be alive. We all are."

"But it seems so selfish."

"It's not selfish, it's just being human," JD whispered. He nuzzled her head against his shoulder.

Amy pulled back a little and looked at him, saw truth in his deep brown

eyes. “I guess you’re right,” she said with a snuffle. “Help me up.”

JD pulled her up from the congealing blood. “That’s my girl,” he said, giving her his special smile, the one that always caused her heart to jump a little. “C’mon. We still have to figure out how to get home.”

“We haven’t finished searching the upstairs,” Freddy said.

They started up the wide staircase, Freddy and Paulette in front, Amy and JD a few steps behind them. JD leaned on the ancient wooden banister for support, but he refused to let her help him.

Near the landing, Amy turned to JD. “What should we be looking...”

A loud roar cut off her words.

“Look out,” Freddy shouted.

Amy looked up in time to see a werewolf leaping towards them, still wearing the ragged clothes of the man they’d found in the armory.

It collided with Paulette and Freddy, sending them tumbling backwards. The rolling mass of bodies swept past Amy and JD, knocking them to the side. Freddy fell two more steps and then managed to grab hold of the banister.

Paulette and the werewolf continued to plunge down the staircase, Paulette screaming and trying to keep the beast’s mouth off her neck, the wolf growling and slashing at her with its claws.

Halfway to the bottom there was a loud *crack* and Paulette’s screams stopped.

The two bodies hit the floor. The werewolf regained its feet and came bounding back up the stairs. JD swung his sword and lopped off one of the creature’s front legs. The werewolf howled in pain and fell back down the staircase, leaving a bloody trail in its wake.

“Paulette!” Freddy ran down the stairs and lifted his girlfriend into his lap.

Paulette’s head flopped limply to one side.

JD limped down the stairs and tried to pull Freddy away from Paulette’s body.

“No! Let me go.”

Freddy shook him off, and then stood up and drove his sword into the werewolf’s broad chest.

The gray-coated monster spasmed around the sword and emitted a yip of pain before going limp.

Christ, it was still alive. It could’ve...

The rest of Amy’s thought went unfinished as the world twisted and turned around them. When the dizziness passed, Freddy and JD were standing over a wax model of a dead werewolf. The all-too-real corpses of Paulette and the Chisholms lay nearby, entwined with more wax monsters.

“We’re back, oh, God, we’re back.” Amy ran over to JD and hugged him

as tightly as she could. “Get me out of this place; I never want to see it again.”

Freddy looked up from Paulette’s body, tears streaming down his face. “What about Paulette? We can’t just leave her here.”

JD put his hand on his best friend’s shoulder. “We have to. Right now we’ve got to find the others and get as far away from this carnival as possible.”

“Do you think the same thing is happening in the other rooms?” Amy asked JD as they hurried to the exit door.

“Yeah, I do. And we might have to go through them all before we can leave.”

As they left, Amy looked back at the three corpses lying in the middle of a cheesy carnival attraction.

What else is waiting for us in this place?

CHAPTER 20

JD

JD wasn't surprised to find they weren't the only ones who'd had a supernatural experience. In the central area by the spiral staircase, MC, Ricky, and Pat Mulroony were telling Boz, Jeanne, Traci, and Chantrelle their tale. A group of science geeks stood off to one side, talking among themselves.

Everyone looked like he felt: bruised, battered, and exhausted. He decided to get involved with the discussions, even though MC and Ricky were the last people he wanted talk to.

Much as I hate to admit it, we're gonna all have to work together if we want to survive.

"We just came from a place where we had to fight werewolves. What happened to you guys?"

"Bite me, douche bag," Ricky said, pointing a finger at JD. "We're doing just fine without you."

"Really?" asked JD. "So what happened to Somers and Clifton? Where are they?"

"They dead." MC rounded on him. "A'aight? Some chainsaw cracker got 'em. Then Ricky here smoked the bastard. Now why don't you get out my grill before's I take care of business wit' you, too."

JD held his ground. "Two of your friends are dead. One of mine is. We need to work together if we're gonna get out of here alive."

MC turned his back to JD. "Take a walk, mayonnaise."

JD glanced around the room, saw only blank, tired, or sullen faces. No one said anything. He turned around and walked back to where Amy sat on the edge of the ramp.

"Forget it. They don't give a damn about anyone but themselves."

"Wait." Boz stepped forward.

JD looked at the stocky football player.

"We went to Salem, Massachusetts. Saw two girls from our school get burned at the stake. We got caught. Some witches, real ones, helped us escape from the jail. Had a fight with the local preacher, who turned out to be a demon. We managed to kill him, and then we rescued Chantrelle just before they burned her. Next thing, we're back here."

One of the science majors cleared his throat. JD recognized him from the school newspaper. AP classes, science fair winner last year. Neil something.

"Something happened to us, too," he said. "We ended up in the center of Whitebridge during an alien invasion. Hundreds of people were killed. We figured out how to turn the aliens' own weapons against them. Doctor Tanaka

helped us build the equipment we needed. We blew up three ships and then something sent us back before the Army finished the job. Tanaka's dead."

"Thanks, Neil," JD said.

"Uh, sure," the skinny science student said, his acne-scarred face blushing crimson.

JD raised his voice. "All right, here's what we know. We all went into different rooms. Inside, the display came to life. We all had to fight some kind of monster, and then suddenly we came back here again. The question is, why?"

Clifford White raised his hand. "I don't know if this helps, JD, but according to my watch we were only in that room for twelve minutes, but a whole day passed by in the alternate Whitebridge." He scratched his close-cropped hair. "That might mean something."

"We were in Salem for more than 24 hours," Jeanne added. "And while we were there, none of our watches worked."

"We were only in the werewolf world for about six hours," JD said.

"How does that help us?" Chantrelle asked.

"I don't know, yet."

"It don't. It's just this hoe jockey's way of makin' hisself sound important," MC said with a snort.

Neil spoke up. "Actually, it means that time flows differently in each room than in the real world."

"I know what the common factor is," Amy said suddenly. Everyone turned to look at her, even Ricky and MC.

"Good versus evil. We fought the monsters and we won."

"What about us?" Neil questioned her. "We didn't kill all of the aliens."

"No, but you figured out how to do it." JD said, unable to control his excitement. "Amy, you're a genius."

"You mean we have to go into each of these rooms and kill the monsters in there?" Traci asked. "No freakin' way. Count me out. Demons, almost being burned at the stake, that's enough for me for one night. I am getting the hell out of here."

"Where are you gonna go?" JD asked.

"Anywhere. I'm walking out the exit and back to the car, and whoever comes with me can drive me home." She said this last while staring at Ricky.

Jeanne stepped forward. "Traci, you can't leave. Remember? No one can enter the last room, the one where the exit is, until we've gone through all the others." She spread her hands. "You're stuck just like the rest of us."

Uh, oh, dissention in the ranks. JD smiled to himself. *Traci's about to learn a valuable lesson.*

Traci spun around and glared at Jeanne.

"What is your problem? You're supposed to be on my side. Or have you

suddenly decided to join the minor leagues, too?"

"There's no sides here, Traci. What JD said makes sense. You don't have to like it, but that's too bad. I'm going to listen to what he says, at least for now."

"Same here," chimed in Boz. MC gave him a cold stare, but didn't say anything.

"Fine. Have it your way. We'll deal with your attitude later." Traci stalked away from everyone and stood by herself near the staircase. After a moment, Ricky joined her.

"So, what do you have in mind?" Boz asked JD.

"Well, the first thing is to find out if each one of us has to go through every room. If we do, then we're probably screwed."

Boz nodded. "We should also see if we can just bust out of this place. The walls are plywood, and from the outside it didn't look like it was put together real well. I'd rather knock a hole someplace and escape than visit any more crazy places."

JD nodded. "Good idea. Why don't you and MC handle that, you're the two strongest here. I'll go back to the Witch Hunt room to see if it transports me anywhere. That's probably the safest one, based on everyone's stories."

"I'll go with you," Cliff said.

"All right. The rest of you wait here."

"No."

JD turned and saw Amy staring at him, her eyes wide and frightened. He cupped his hands in back of her head, under her tangled, auburn hair, and pulled her close to kiss her. "Don't worry, I'm sure I won't end up in Salem. I'll be right back."

"Then let me come with you," she pleaded.

"I can't. Just in case I'm wrong, you're the only one I trust to come rescue us."

She nodded and stepped back.

JD turned to Cliff. "Ready?"

The smaller boy nodded. "As ready as I'll ever be." .

"Let's do it." JD didn't look back as they walked up the ramp, even though he could feel Amy's eyes on him the whole time.

I hope this isn't a mistake.

CHAPTER 21

Cliff

Cliff entered the room with JD, the door swinging shut behind them. He looked around, expecting to see the forest Boz had described earlier, but they were still in the same tacky chamber.

On the floor lay the charred corpses of the two students, next to plaster and wax displays of witches tied to stakes. The heavy, greasy stench of roasted flesh hung in the air, a solid, living entity coiling around them as they walked through the room.

Cliff gagged, burping up acidic vomit that tasted vaguely of the corndog he'd eaten earlier. Next to him, JD pulled his jacket over his mouth and nose.

"Let's get out of here."

Cliff didn't even bother to answer, just ran to the exit and flung it open. In the hall, he drew in deep breaths of fresh air. JD came out behind him, inhaling several times before calling down to the others.

"We're okay."

"No luck on our end," Boz shouted up to them. "This place is put together stronger than Fort Knox. The plywood didn't even move, no matter how hard we hit it."

Muffled banging and cursing echoed up to them, indicating MC hadn't given up trying. From the look on JD's face, Cliff got the feeling he wasn't surprised at the news.

"Now comes the hard part," Cliff said, heading down the wooden ramp.

"Yeah. Four down, four more to go."

JD

JD took a moment to adjust his elastic knee brace. So far the joint hadn't swollen, even with all the abuse it had taken tonight. He took a deep breath, then called for everyone's attention.

"We need to decide what room to do next, and all go in together. We already know time moves differently in each room; if we don't enter at the same time we could be separated by hours or even days."

"No, there's something else we have to do first," Amy told him.

"What?"

"We have to find Chris, Zach, and Dave. They went into a different room than the rest of us. They're the only ones who haven't come back out."

"That just means they're dead," Ricky said. "We made it out, those

stoners didn't. What a surprise. Survival of the fittest, man. I ain't looking for them."

JD didn't want to admit it, but Ricky made a good point. If they hadn't come out yet, they probably weren't going to. He looked at Amy. Her face fell.

Crap. How can I tell her no?

"Fine. We'll kill two birds with one stone. We don't know if them going in but not coming out counts towards us completing that room. It may be someone has to come out alive in order for the room to be deactivated, or whatever. We can look for them and cross one room off the list at the same time."

Amy's grateful smile lightened his heart for a brief moment. "They went into the room with the zombie display," she said.

"Okay. Remember, once we're inside we have to size up the situation and solve it as fast as possible."

"You turds go ahead and look for your zombies. We're going into a different room." Ricky said. MC stood next to him, arms crossed and fists clenched.

"Ricky, we already agreed it's better not to split up," JD said.

"I didn't agree to nothing. You also said we don't all have to go into every room. If we split up, we can go through the rooms twice as fast and get out of here twice as fast."

"But you're also increasing your chances of getting somebody killed."

"Shit, if that hillbilly scarface couldn't kill us, ain't nothin' this place throws at us gonna cap our asses." MC flexed his arms, muscles bulging under his thin sweatshirt.

JD shook his head. "Have it your way. We split up. Who's coming with us?"

Boz, Jeanne, Fred, Cliff, Neil, and Danny stepped forward. Speedy, Chantrelle, and Pat Mulrooney joined Ricky and MC.

To JD's surprise, the plain-looking girl Neil had been hanging on followed Traci.

Her action seemed to catch Neil off guard as well. "Josie, what are you doing? Why are you going with them?"

"I want to live," Josie said in a calm voice. "Ricky and MC have a better chance of keeping us safe."

"Bull. You're just going with them because you have the hots for that asshole," he said, pointing at Ricky.

"Shut up. I do not." Josie's face went red.

Cliff touched his arm. "Stick with us, Neil. We're better off as a team."

Neil sighed, then walked over to Josie and parked himself next to her. "Fine. If you're going to be stupid, I'll go with you and make sure nothing

happens to you."

"You can do what you want," she said, looking over at Ricky. "I already know we'll be safe."

JD wondered how she could mistake Ricky's smirk for a genuine smile. The quarterback was obviously getting a kick out of watching the 'nerds' argue.

"C'mere, babe," Ricky nodded to Josie. "You're a smart chick. You should stay close to me. Who knows, I might even be lookin' for a new girlfriend pretty soon," he added, poking MC in the ribs.

Josie didn't catch the sarcasm. Instead, she waltzed over to Ricky as if on a string. Neil scowled, but didn't move.

JD assumed that would end things, but then Traci dropped another bombshell. "Well, since you seem to have your little squeeze by your side, I'm going with JD."

She crossed the room and linked her arm through JD's. He quickly pulled away, but it was too late. Anger flared in Ricky's eyes.

"You do, and we're through," he told her through gritted teeth, his blue eyes as cold as a winter sky. "Just like your friend Cherry over there. Once you leave, ain't no comin' back."

"Yeah, well, maybe I don't want to," Traci answered back. "Maybe it's time for me to find a real man," she said, jerking her head towards JD.

"You bitch," Ricky shouted, balling his fists and taking a step forward. Speedy blocked him with an arm.

MC whooped and yelled, "Bust that skank-ho's head open!"

Ricky, MC, Speedy, Traci, and Chantrelle all yelled at once, their voices blending into such a loud roar that JD couldn't make out the words.

"Enough already!" Boz's shout rose above the din.

Like someone hitting the mute button on a remote control, everyone stopped in mid-sentence.

Boz stood there, fists clenched, a big, blue vein throbbing at this temple. "Look, let's just get this over with, and then we can all go our own ways and not have to spend any more time with each other, okay?"

Ricky stared at Traci a little longer, and then flipped his middle finger at her.

"Bite me," Traci responded.

"Back at you. I don't give a rat's ass who comes with us and who doesn't. You're going into the zombie room? We'll take the next room up, whatever it is."

He started up the ramp, the others in his group following.

After the door closed behind them, JD turned and addressed the remaining students. "Okay, so we're going into a zombie room. In the movies I've seen, you kill zombies by cutting their heads off, shooting them in the brain, or

burning them. They like to eat human flesh. Anything else?"

Danny lifted his hand. "If a zombie bites you, you die from the infection. Then you rise up in a few hours as a new zombie. And they usually go for the brains and intestines." He patted his short, spiky hair and his stomach as he spoke.

"Ugh. You had to add that, brainiac?" Traci made a moue of disgust. Sidling up to JD, she stage-whispered to him. "You'll keep me safe, won't you?"

"Traci, do me a favor and stay the hell away from me." He pushed her away.

God, what a selfish bitch.

JD grabbed Amy's hand and started up the ramp. "C'mon. I'd rather deal with the monsters.

SECTION III: Unlikely Heroes

CHAPTER 1

Amy

JD paused at the door to the zombie chamber.

"What's wrong?" Amy asked.

"We don't know what we'll find on the other side," he said to them. "It could be Main Street in town, or it could be another country altogether. I've got a knife I brought back from the werewolf castle. Does anyone else have any weapons?"

No one said anything.

"Then finding weapons, preferably guns, is the first thing we should do. Ready? I'm opening the door."

Like the previous room, this one was dark, with only some tiny bulbs high in the ceiling providing a whisper of light. Amy grabbed his hand, not wanting to get separated in the dark. Once the last person entered, the door closed with a soft whoosh.

A whoosh? Why would it make that sound?

The lights grew brighter, gradually revealing their surroundings.

"We're in a mall?" Traci asked. "This isn't a nightmare, it's a dream come true."

"Don't be too sure," Cliff said, pointing back the way they'd come.

A double set of automatic glass doors, same as Amy knew from a hundred other malls, now stood behind them. Outside, hundreds of living corpses piled against each other and the glass, clawing and pounding to get in. Their low moans echoed through the silent hallway, sending a chill up her spine.

"This is not good," Danny said.

"Let's get away from the entrance," Boz suggested. "I think our being here is agitating them."

"Yeah, they're like dogs trying to figure out how to open a garbage can, and we're the meat scraps inside," Freddy said.

"Good idea." JD agreed. "But where do we go? Does anyone recognize this mall?"

Traci gave a loud sigh. "Use your brains, people. Every mall has a directory." She pointed down the corridor at a large rectangular sign.

Someone, Amy thought it was Danny, murmured, "Maybe she'll actually be a help here. Nobody knows malls better than Traci and her friends."

"Screw that." Cliff shook his head. "She's still a bitch. I hope the zombies eat her."

Head held high, Traci led the way down the hall. Once they'd looked over the mall directory, Freddy suggested Save-Mart would be the best place to go.

"We can get food, water, and weapons there. I know they sell guns. I bought my first twenty-two in a Save-Mart." Freddy said.

"Well, yee-haw, cowboy. I suppose you buy your cowboy boots there, too?" came Traci's sarcastic voice.

Boz answered her before Freddy could say anything. "Hey, Traci, shut your mouth before I shut it for you."

Amy looked up in surprise. She'd never heard Boz talk that way before, especially to a girl. What he said next was even more out of character.

"My family shops in Save-Mart. K-Mart and Wal-Mart, too. Not everyone has a rich daddy. My father's a farmer. He drives a pickup truck with a gun rack on it. That makes me shit-kicking hick, too. Wanna make fun of me?"

For the first time Amy could remember, Traci Trachsel was speechless.

Oh, I wish I had a camera right now.

Traci stood there, mouth open but no words coming out. Then her lower jaw closed with a snap. She turned her back on them and starting walking towards the Save-Mart, the click-clack of her shoes on the tiles echoing in the empty hall.

Forgetting they'd had hardly spoken in months, Amy turned to Jeanne. "What the hell did Boz eat for breakfast today? He's always been more of the strong, silent type."

Jeanne nodded. "He's tired of her and Ricky's crap. After what we've been through tonight, it makes you realize what's important and what's not."

She looked at Amy, her green eyes serious. "He's not the only one who feels that way. When this is all over, I'm quitting the cheerleading squad. I've had enough, too. If my grades and other extra-curricular activities aren't enough to get me into the schools I want, there're always my second or third choices. I just can't live with the person I've become."

Amy desperately wanted to believe her friend, but the cynical side of her said wait and see. Jeanne might feel this way now, but in three weeks, when their lives were back to normal, it might not be so easy to make the move from Miss Popular to Miss Outcast.

"That's great, Jeanne. I'd like for us to hang out again."

The corner of Jeanne's mouth twitched. "You don't believe me. That's cool. If I were you I wouldn't believe me, either. I know I've been a real jerk. But as of right now that Jeanne is gone."

On impulse, Amy reached out and gave Jeanne's hand a quick squeeze, then increased her pace and caught up with JD. She knew if she kept talking to Jeanne she'd either cry or get mad, and this wasn't the place for either. Just the fact that they'd taken the first tentative steps towards reconciliation made her feel better.

"What was that about?" JD asked.

"Jeanne says she and Boz are planning on coming over to the dark side."

"I'm surprised it took this long. They're both too smart and too nice for that crowd. Especially after you moved on."

"It's not as easy for them. Ricky and the others can make life real hard for Boz on the football field, maybe even arrange it so he doesn't get to play. That would blow his chances for a football scholarship. And Jeanne wants to get into a big name college. Grades aren't enough for that. You need extracurricular activities, too, and a good reputation."

"Scary to think that assholes like Ricky and Traci wield so much power."

"That's what happens when you have money. I know; I come from a family just like theirs. My dad calls it the modern law of the jungle: survival of the fittest is based on what you earn and who you know."

"Yeah, I know people like that. And you know what? They never seem happy. But I know a lot of families who barely scrape by, and yet they always have a positive outlook on life, even when money's tight."

Amy smiled up at her boyfriend and clasped his hand. "Well, considering you're going to be a starving writer and I'm going to be a starving artist, we'll be the happiest people on earth."

JD laughed, and for just a moment the fact that they were only a few hundred feet away from a horde of flesh eating zombies didn't seem so terrifying.

Amazing what the right girl could do for your outlook on life.

CHAPTER 2

Neil

As they walked away from the others, Neil gripped Josie's hand. "Are you sure you don't want to go with Cliff and Danny?"

"Think about it, Neil. If things get really dangerous, and you know they will, would you rather be with Cliff and Danny or three big football players?"

"If it wasn't for me, Cliff, and Danny, you'd be dead right now."

Josie had the grace to blush at Neil's angry retort, but she didn't respond.

"Check this out." Speedy tapped on the door, which bore a comical drawing of a wild-haired man in a lab coat. "Whatcha think's on the other side?"

"Who cares?" MC spit on the floor. "Whatever it be, we'll kick its ass."

"All right, let's do this," Ricky said in his best game-day voice. He opened the door and stood to the side, allowing everyone to file in. Speedy and Chantrelle, the last two in line, hesitated. "What, you gonna let a couple geeks show you up? Move it."

Speedy grabbed Chantrelle's hand and they walked past Ricky, not saying a word. Ricky stepped in, the door swinging shut behind him. Just before the door closed, the light streaming in from the hallway reflected whitely in Ricky's wide eyes, and Neil had a sudden flash of insight.

He's as scared as the rest of us.

Once the door closed, they were left in the dark until Neil remembered the flashlight in his coat pocket. The cone of light revealed a hard-packed dirt path or road surrounded by rocky soil, scattered undergrowth, and scrubby trees. It was night, and heavy cloud cover blocked any stars or moon that might have provided illumination.

A huge flash of lightening cut a jagged path across the sky, throwing their surroundings in stark relief and causing everyone to jump. Neil's arm jerked and he dropped the flashlight. Chantrelle emitted a brief squeak of terror. Before the glow from the electrical discharge had even faded, a bone-vibrating roll of thunder crashed over the barren landscape, and sheets of cold, heavy rain cascaded down.

As Neil bent down to grab the flashlight, Speedy muttered, "Oh, this just sucks."

"Did anyone see that building?" Josie asked.

"Building? You smokin' crack?" MC stood in the chilly rain, unmindful of the rivulets of water running off his bald, round head.

"I swear I saw something," Josie insisted. "It was a big, dark building, like a castle."

Another flash of lightening crossed the sky, accompanied by booming thunder. “There it is,” Josie shouted, pointing ahead of them.

“I don’t see nuthin,” MC muttered, but now he joined the others peering into the gloom. The next lightning bolt rewarded their efforts, illuminating a hulking edifice less than two hundred yards away.

“That’s probably where we have to fight whatever’s waiting for us,” Neil said. “And that lightening seems real close. If we stay out here we could end up being fried.”

As if in agreement another lighting-and-thunder combination punctuated his words, the light and sound show seeming to explode right overhead. As a group, they ran for the castle, Speedy leading the way.

By the time they reached the wide entranceway, they were all drenched and splattered with mud. MC flung open the heavy, double-doors and everyone hurried inside.

“Man, this is some freaky place,” Mulroony said.

Torches burned in sconces along both walls of the great hall. A moth-eaten rug, the pattern almost completely faded away, ran across the center of the room, covering a large portion of the worn stone floor.

Ragged tapestries hung on the rough stone walls, some depicting violent hunting scenes where men dressed in fine clothes posed with the butchered corpses of wolves, elk, and foxes. In others, men and women gathered around enormous tables piled high with fresh game. Blood and organs were captured in almost photographic detail, and even the fading colors and moth holes couldn’t lessen the gruesome, visceral impact of the artwork.

“Gimme that flashlight, nerd boy,” Ricky held his hand out to Neil.

Neil pulled it back. “No way.”

Josie elbowed him. “Don’t start trouble, just give it to him.”

“Fine.” Neil handed it over, along with what he hoped was a resentful stare. Ricky paid no attention as he grabbed the flashlight and walked over to one of the walls, playing the light across the different tapestries.

“Man, this place is whack,” MC said, following Ricky through the room. “Let’s find the fagnut runnin’ the show, and eighty-six the muther so’s we can make tracks.”

“Which way, up or down?” Speedy asked, pointing to the huge staircase at the far end of the hall. It extended above and below their current level.

“We should start at the top and work our way down,” Neil suggested. “Search the bedrooms and stuff first, see if we can figure out who lives here, and how many of them there are.”

“No, we’ll start in the basement,” Ricky countered. “The creepy stuff always happens in the basement. I wanna get this over with as fast as we can.”

Neil looked around. Speedy shrugged his shoulders, while Chantrelle mumbled something about ‘who the hell cared.’

Josie averted her gaze from him.

"Great, whatever, do what you want. I'll just keep my mouth shut." *I hope you fall down the steps and die, asswipe.*

"Good idea, nancy-boy," MC said with a laugh. "No one be interested in what you gots to say no how. You keep flippin' off at the jibs and I might loosen yo' fronts myself."

Speedy looked at Neil, a serious look on his face. "Dude, don't mess with him. He said if you open your mouth again he's gonna bust your teeth. And he wasn't foolin' around, dilbert." Speedy walked away.

Chantrelle sidled up to Josie. "Girl, whatever you do, don't get caught alone wit' MC. He's bad news, likes to have his way with the ladies, whether they be willing or not, understand, *chica*?"

"Yeah, I do," Josie said quietly to Chantrelle's back as the Latino girl followed her boyfriend.

"These are the kind of people you want to hang out with?" Neil whispered to Josie. "Assholes, rapists, bullies? What's your deal?"

"Screw you, Neil. Everything's not black and white." She let out a long, slow breath. "Jeanne and Amy are smart *and* popular. Why can't I be?"

Neil looked at Josie. He considered her pretty, but he knew others saw a slightly chubby girl with plain hair and out-of-style clothes. She'd never be part of the cheerleader crowd, but he wouldn't be the one to tell her. Especially not after she'd just bared her soul to him.

"Josie, I don't know about that. But all of a sudden Jeanne and Amy aren't hanging out with Ricky and Traci anymore. You just said they're smart. Maybe this is them doing a smart thing."

"I should have known you'd find a way to make Ricky the bad guy," Josie said. "You're just jealous because he's athletic, handsome, and popular."

"Yeah, I probably am, but at least I've got a brain in my head. So you know what? Go hang with Mr. Perfect. I'm sure he'll treat you real good. And when he's finished dumping on you, remember who your real friends were."

Neil turned his back on her, partly to make a grand exit and partly so she wouldn't see the tears in his eyes. He walked over to one of the thick, lead-glass windows facing out into the stormy night. Josie's blurry reflection watched him, then turned around and slowly walked away, leaving nothing but the rain and his own tear-streaked face.

Why'd I open my mouth like that? Now she must hate me. Neil leaned his head on the cold glass and closed his eyes, wishing it was all a dream, that he'd simply fallen asleep over his physics textbooks.

Pat Mulroony's voice broke through his reverie. "Hey nerd-boy, move it. We're heading downstairs, and we ain't waiting for nobody." With a sigh, Neil dragged himself back to the present.

Nope, not a dream.
Isn't life just great.

CHAPTER 3

JD

When they reached the Save-Mart, JD and the others found Traci sitting on a bench in front of the store, impatiently tapping her foot.

"About time you got here. I've been waiting forever."

"Why didn't you go inside?" Jeanne asked.

"What, by myself? No way. Who knows what kind of monsters are in there."

"So, what's first?" Boz asked JD as they entered the store.

JD looked back at him, a little surprised at the question. *Boz is asking my opinion now? Never thought I'd see the day.*

"Weapons, food, and water. I don't know about anyone else, but I'm really thirsty."

"Sounds good."

They walked down the main aisle, reading the signs until they came to the beverages and snacks section. Turning the corner, JD wouldn't have been shocked to see zombies, werewolves, or even a few corpses, but what they found totally stopped him in his tracks.

Dave Pellegi sat cross-legged on the floor, a bag of Doritos, a box of Oreos, and a bottle of RC cola open in front of him. Scattered around the aisle were more junk food packages and soda bottles.

"Yo, dude. Cool, I knew someone would find us."

Before JD could say anything, Chris came around the opposite corner, arms loaded with video games and movies. Behind him, Zach carried a portable DVD and a game player.

"Check it out. The reinforcements are here."

When Amy saw Chris, she let out a shout of relief and wrapped her arms around him.

"Whoa, Amy. You're gonna make me drop the tunes."

"You jerks," she said, smiling and angry at the same time. "I should have known you'd find a way to turn the worst night of our lives into a party."

"You guys have been sitting here all this time? Haven't you tried to get away?"

JD understood the disbelief in Cliff's voice; he felt the same way.

"Get away? Dude, are you for real? There's like a thousand zombies outside, waiting to eat some nice, fresh brains. You'd have to be crazy to leave this mall. We got everything we need here. We figured we'd just wait for someone to rescue us. And here you are. So, how do we get home?"

JD found himself speechless at their *ce'st la vie* attitude. Danny took the

lead and filled them in. Shaking his head in wonder, JD motioned to Freddy and Boz to follow him down the aisle.

"Well, finding them was a lot easier than I thought it would be. I'm glad they're alive, but I'm not sure how good they'll be in a fight. If they've been partying, which seems likely, I don't know if I'd want one of them behind me with a loaded gun."

"You got that right," agreed Fred. "But they can still help. We should split up, some of us going for weapons, some for the other things we'll need, like walkie-talkies and flashlights."

"Good idea," JD said. "Me and Boz will do the guns. You take Cliff or Danny with you for the radios. Each of us will take one of our 'party boys' with us. That'll leave two guys to stay with the girls."

"Sounds cool," Freddy said.

Like most retail stores, Save-Mart wasn't allowed to sell handguns, but it had a large assortment of rifles and shotguns, as well as knives and ammunition. After busting open the cash register to get the keys for the trigger locks, JD and Boz helped themselves to all the guns in the case and as much ammunition as they could stuff into a shopping bag. They also took several large hunting knives, matches, and some flares.

When they got back to the snack food section, they spread out the weapons and began matching shells to guns. Before they had a chance to finish, Freddy came back with more good news.

"Check this out. We found sleeping bags and some Coleman stoves."

"Stoves? Sleeping bags? What do we need those for?" JD asked, as Fred, Cliff, and Zach dropped the supplies to the ground.

"Hey, you can sit on the cold floor if you want, but I'd rather be comfortable. We were gonna take camp chairs, but we couldn't carry enough for everyone."

"Don't listen to him, Fred, it was a great idea," Amy said, unrolling a sleeping bag and plopping down. Jeanne joined her.

"Okay, so the sleeping bags were a good idea, but what about the stoves? What are we going to cook?" JD asked Fred, while Cliff and Danny spread the rest of the bags out.

"No problem there," Zach replied. "This place has everything, including a frozen foods section. We'll grab some burgers and dogs, have us a little barbeque."

JD looked back and forth between Fred and Zach. "Damn, that's smart thinking." While Zach and Cliff left to get the food, JD sat down next to Amy.

"Chris, why don't you tell us what's been going on since you guys got here, and we'll see how it matches up with what's happened in the other rooms."

"Sure." Chris took a swig of soda and began his story.

CHAPTER 4

Ricky

They took their time descending the staircase, picking their way carefully on the slick, narrow stone risers. Everyone carried one of the burning torches except for Ricky, who still held the flashlight. He counted one hundred and seven steps before they got to the basement.

"Spread out, look for a door or something. My guess is the head creep is down here someplace, building a bomb or torturing animals, whatever jerkoff crazies like to do."

Speedy came up next to Ricky. "Dude, this is creeping me out. Maybe we oughta like, find some weapons or something before we go trying to take down Dr. Satan or whoever."

Ricky looked at Speedy. It was like the tall, thin Hispanic had read his mind. Then he opened his mouth, and not for the first time in his life heard it spit out words completely at odds with his thoughts.

"Don't wuss out on me now, this ain't the place. We're here, we'll deal. You wanna look for weapons, go ahead. We'll use 'em. But we ain't leaving."

"Sheeit," Speedy groused, and then wandered off, leaving Ricky standing alone.

I hate being in charge. Goddamn carnival. Why the fuck did we have to come here?

"Hey guys, check this out." It was that nerd boy, Nell or Noel or whatever.

Guy's trouble, always tryin' to turn everyone against me. Gotta watch him.

"There's a room over here," the nerd said, stepping away from a doorway.

"It's a morgue."

CHAPTER 5

Neil

Neil ground his teeth as MC, Ricky, and Pat Mulroony pushed past him. Two rusty, stained metal tables occupied the center of the room. The flickering light of the torches reflected off puddles of dark fluid on the floor that he didn't want to examine closer.

The tables themselves were filthy, spotted with clumps of flesh and hair. Gutters for blood and other fluids, all looking recently used, ran along both sides.

Floor-to-ceiling wooden shelves ran along two walls, filled with jars and phials. Some of the bottles held odd-colored liquids. Others contained eyeballs, tongues, and unrecognizable organs, all floating in formaldehyde or alcohol.

Josie picked up a container. "Oh, god, it's a severed penis."

She dropped the jar to the stone floor and it shattered, filling the room with a vile odor. Josie gagged, and Neil had to wipe tears from his eyes.

"Keep quiet, you assholes," Ricky hissed from the back of the room, where he and MC were about to open another door. "Why don't you just let the whole freakin' world know we're here?" He grabbed the handle and pulled.

"Oh, shit!" Ricky stumbled backwards and would have fallen except MC caught him. Regaining his composure, he aimed the flashlight into the second room.

Even from across the room, Neil had no trouble seeing the gruesome contents. Bodies dangled from hooks like sides of beef. The room was freezing; the distinctive tang of dry ice piggybacked on the clouds of fog that formed as the frigid air met the slightly warmer atmosphere of the basement. Many of the corpses were incomplete, missing arms, legs, and heads. More than a few had gaping holes where organs should have been.

"What the hell is this fucking place?" Speedy asked.

"Hector!"

Everyone jumped at Chantrelle's scream.

Speedy rushed to her side. "Cali, what's wrong?" She was standing by one of the shelves, pointing to a large jar, her other hand over her mouth.

"*Papi!* You gotta get me out of here, *rapido*."

"Calm down, *chica*, what gives? Oh, *mierda*, it's a head. That what got you all freaked out?"

Chantrelle shook her head, tried again to get the words out. By now everyone had gathered around her.

"Look at it. Don't you see? LOOK AT IT!"

"Make some sense, girl."

"I think...it's Tammi Bruno."

"Tammi's on the cheerleading team, right?" Neil whispered to Josie.

Josie nodded and peered at the jar. "Whoever did this was a surgeon, or should have been. This is a perfectly clean cut, no jagged edges."

"Hey, shut your mouth." Pat Mulroony pushed her away from the shelf. "I used to go out with Tammi, and all you can say is they did a good job cutting her head off? Cold-hearted bitch." He spat on the ground near her feet and stalked away.

Josie turned to Neil. "I didn't mean it in a bad way. I was just making an observation."

Neil opened his mouth to answer her, but movement from the doorway caught his attention.

A man stood there, tall, with dark, oily hair going gray at the temples and several days' growth of beard on his face. He wore black pants, a white button-down shirt, and an old-fashioned lab coat over his clothes. Reddish-brown and yellow stains covered the white garment. Around his neck hung an odd-looking stethoscope. At first, Neil couldn't tell what seemed different about it, and then he realized it only had one earpiece.

Talk about ancient.

"So, it looks like we have more intruders. How wonderful." The man spoke in a deep, cultured tone, the voice of a learned gentleman, someone who would be at home in front of a university classroom.

"Intruders? No, we're not intruders," Josie said. "We were lost, in the storm. Outside. No one answered the door, so, we, uh, came inside, and we found you. We were lost, did I mention that?"

"Young miss, do you take me for a complete fool? I have been listening to your conversations for several minutes now. I see you recognized one of my earlier visitors." He smiled and pointed to the jar containing Tammi Bruno's head.

"A pretty creature, but in the end not quite suitable for my work. Too thin and frail. She didn't have the strength I needed." The man shook his head and made little *tsk-tsk* noises.

"You killed her." Pat Mulroony took a step forward, fists clenched. Behind him, MC looked ready for a fight. Ricky and Speedy stood nearby as well, although Neil thought they seemed less eager. As for himself, he would have gladly ducked behind a shelf or under a table, if it weren't for Josie standing her ground next to him.

"Yes, boy, I did. I've killed quite a few strangers over the past two days. It seems many people have 'gotten lost' outside the castle. This has been most advantageous for me, as it has saved me several trips into town."

He held up one hand and snapped his fingers. “Belua, attend me.”

Whatever Neil expected, nothing could have prepared him for the creature that entered, yet in retrospect it made perfect sense. If he’d been thinking more about what was on the other side of the door in the Castle of Terror, and less on Ricky and Josie, he might have been able to warn everyone.

Who am I kidding? No one would’ve listened to me anyway.

The brute stood seven feet tall, with a build like a professional football player or wrestler. The ragged, patched shirt and pants he wore did nothing to hide the scars where different body parts had been sewn together.

One huge hand was complete; the other seemed to have come from three or four different sources. His head appeared whole, except for the left ear, which didn’t match its mate in color or size. Dark brown hair ended in a sharp widow’s peak, and like a Siberian Husky, he had one blue eye and one brown.

“The picture on the door, it was Dr. Frankenstein,” Neil whispered to Josie. “And this is his monster.”

“And we are in deep shit,” she whispered back.

CHAPTER 6

JD

JD leaned against a shelf and listened as Chris told them how he and his friends had ended up in the mall.

"When me, Zach, and Dave went into the room, it was just what you'd expect," Chris said. "You know, plastic statues with blood on them, spooky lighting, the whole deal. Then everything went fuzzy, and next thing you know we're in front of this mall."

"What happened next?" JD asked.

Chris laughed. "We thought we were trippin', that someone slipped something into the weed. But then a bunch of people across the street started screaming. We couldn't see too well in the dark, and we thought maybe it was a gang fight. Some of them came towards us and that's when we figured it out."

"What?"

"They were zombies, man. The walking dead." Chris held up his hands, made claws out of them. "Way freaky. So we took off. Ran around the mall until we found a service entrance someone left open. We ducked inside and locked it behind us."

Chris took another sip of soda. "We figured that in the morning either the zombies would go away or someone would rescue us. So we parked ourselves here to wait. Then you guys showed up."

"Unreal. You weren't scared?"

Chris's eyebrows rose into his blondish hair. "Hell, yeah. It took two joints of primo weed to calm our nerves. That's when the munchies hit," he added, holding up a bag of chips.

JD thought about what Chris had said.

"You know, it actually makes sense to wait for daylight. We already know time moves differently here, so a few more hours in this reality won't be much time back home. In the daylight we can signal for help, and it will be easier to see the zombies if they're still around. I think we all need some rest after the day we've had."

Zach came around the corner with an armful of hamburgers, hot dogs, and buns. "Yo, dudes, barbeque time."

Well, they always say an army fights better on a full stomach. And I have a feeling there's a lot of fighting still to go, JD thought as he fired up one of the stoves.

JD finished his second hamburger and leaned back. By unspoken agreement, no one had discussed the zombies or the carnival while they ate, but now the time had come to make some decisions.

"Okay, guys. I think we ought to get some sleep, but first let's set up a watch for the night."

"Why bother, dude?" Dave asked through a mouthful of Doritos. Specks of orange flecked his chin. "Those freakazoids have been out there for hours, and they haven't been able to get in."

"Yeah, well, I don't want to take the chance. Three of us will keep watch for the first four hours, and then three more will take over until morning."

"I'll take first watch," volunteered Boz. "I'm really not that tired. I'm gonna head over to the sporting goods section and get in a little workout, get the blood flowing. I'll be able to see the front doors from there."

"I'll stay up, too," seconded Chris. "I already took a nap before you guys got here."

"Count me in," Danny said. "I'm a night owl anyway."

"Who wants second watch with me?" JD asked.

"I'll do it," Fred told him.

Cliff raised his hand as well.

"Okay," JD told them. "Boz, you guys wake us up in four hours."

Boz nodded and walked away, taking a shotgun with him. Chris and Danny each grabbed a gun and went out into the mall to find good lookout points.

"Ready to get some sleep, Ames?" JD asked.

"Yeah, but first Jeanne and I are going to go find the bathroom and freshen up a little," she told him. "And we're going to grab some clean clothes. My stuff is all ruined."

"Good idea. I'm gonna grab a sweatshirt too, and I want to see if they've got any knee braces. With all this walking we've been doing, I want one with more support. I'll meet you back here."

"Okay." Amy gave him a kiss and then headed off with Jeanne.

Quick trips through the Sporting Goods and Men's departments netted JD everything he needed. He also helped himself to a bottle of pain reliever, popping four to take away the ache in his knee.

After slipping on his new, heavy-duty athletic knee wrap, he dragged a couple of sleeping bags down the aisle away from everyone else. Two pillows completed their bed. He'd just stripped off his dirty shirt when two arms slipped around his waist and he felt the unmistakable softness of bare breasts pressed against his back.

"Ames, everyone can see us." He turned in her arms.

And found himself face-to-face with Traci Trachsel.

"Let them watch," she said in a low, husky voice.

JD pulled free from her grasp. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Stop pretending, JD. We both know you want me.” She reached out, ran a hand down his chest. “Now’s your chance.”

“No way.” He stepped back until he bumped into a shelf.

I can’t believe this is happening. How the hell do I get rid of her before Amy comes back?

Traci spread her arms wide. She’d already removed her shirt, and JD couldn’t help staring at her. Then he shook his head.

“You don’t get it, do you? Nice tits aren’t everything. You’re nothing but a stuck up bitch. You and Ricky deserve each other, so just get the hell out of here.”

Traci’s face drained of color except for twin spots of red on each cheek. She stood up and began screaming, her voice and nakedness bringing on the commotion he’d hoped to avoid.

“You son of a bitch! You think she’s so great? She’s not, you know. She used to make fun of you and your friends, and she used to screw Ricky, and she used to do all the things you hate about me. Worse things.”

“You’re wrong,” JD said, keenly aware of the people gathering around them. “Amy’s nothing like you. You’re hot shit now, but when your looks are gone you’ll be nothing but a washed-up, middle-aged has-been, filled with botox and silicon, cheating with the tennis pro while your husband works himself into an early grave. Look around, Traci. You think we’re all losers, but *you’re* the real loser.”

JD paused for breath, his anger depleted. For a moment, Traci’s upper lip quivered, and he regretted some of the things he’d said. Then the crack in her cold shell closed up and fire flashed in her eyes as she hurled herself at him. She clawed and kicked, even tried to bite his arms when he grabbed her and pushed her away. When that didn’t work, he did something he’d never done to a girl before.

He slapped her across the face, connecting solidly with her left cheek.

As if his hand striking her flesh turned off a switch, she went still. Her heavy, raspy breathing sounded loud in the silence surrounding them. Then she turned and ran down the aisle, around the corner and out of sight.

This is gonna cause all sorts of trouble.

Head down, JD slowly turned around, not wanting to face Amy and the others, not knowing what to expect. Amy dropped the big pile of clothes she’d been holding and ran up to him, hugging him in a tight embrace.

“That was wonderful! I can’t believe you said those things to her, all the things I always wanted to say but I never had the guts.”

“You’re not mad?”

“Mad? For what? Telling the prettiest girl in school you’d rather be with me?”

"I thought you'd be pissed about her being all naked."

"JD, in all the time we've been going out you've never given me one reason to be jealous. What makes you think I'd even consider that you were fooling around with her?"

Amy leaned up and planted a hard kiss on his lips. "What you did tonight makes me love you more than ever, because it shows how much you really love me."

Someone slapped him on the shoulder, and everyone started laughing.

"Dude, that was totally awesome. You put that bitch in her place," Dave said.

"Yeah, you'll be a hero if we ever make it back to school," Cliff added.

"Thanks, but I'm no hero." JD shook his head. "Now we've got an angry cheerleader running around. Somebody's got to go find her."

"Why?" Chris asked. "She'll come back. Where's she gonna go?"

"No, JD's right, someone's got to get her," Boz said, "before she does something stupid. Or dangerous."

"I'll go." Jeanne shrugged. "I'm the only one here she might listen to."

"I'll go with you." Boz shouldered his rifle and they left.

"Now what?" Freddy asked.

"Now we wait," JD said, sitting down with a sigh. "Might as well break open the chips and soda. I don't think anyone's getting any sleep tonight after all."

CHAPTER 7

Neil

Neil expected Belua to be slow and clumsy, but any resemblance to the Frankenstein monster of the movies disappeared as soon as the creature moved. Like an angered bear, his size masked a hidden grace and speed.

Neil pulled Josie to the side as MC charged forward and swung a massive fist at the monster's face. The blow never connected. Belua caught MC's arm in one hand, and grabbed the running back's belt with his other. No strain showed on the monster's face as he hoisted the struggling student into the air and slammed him down on one of the autopsy tables.

MC's breath left him in a loud *whoosh* as he slid through the slime and gobbets of decaying flesh and crashed onto the stone floor.

Faster than Neil would have believed possible, Belua lunged forward, grasped Ricky and Speedy by their necks, and brought their heads together. The hollow *thunk* of their skulls connecting echoed in the cold room as they both fell to the ground.

"Do something!" Josie shouted.

"What?" Neil looked around, trying to find a place to hide.

Pat Mulroony tried to land a hard kick to Belua's stomach, but the re-animated corpse caught his foot and twisted, first breaking the leg and then continuing around in a circular motion until the entire limb pulled free of its socket.

Mulroony shrieked and collapsed to the ground. A red fountain pumped from the stump of his leg. He beat his hands against the floor and his eyes bulged as he screamed for help.

"Oh, Jesus." Josie clutched at Neil's arm as the monster dropped Mulroony's leg and advanced on them, rivulets of blood running from his hands and down his worn, faded shirt. Mulroony gave one last choking gasp and went still, a wide puddle of red spreading beneath him.

"Belua, halt."

The monster stopped at the doctor's command. Frankenstein smiled at Neil, Josie, and Chantrelle, and gestured at the gore-splattered behemoth.

"Magnificent, isn't he? He is my masterpiece."

"Magnificent? *Pendejo loco,*" screamed Chantrelle. She bent over Speedy's prone body. "You killed my Hector."

"Did not kill. Put to sleep," Belua said in a deep, raspy voice that bordered on harsh.

Vocal cord damage, Neil mused. *Is it from surgery or did the previous owner of the throat sound like that?*

"Doctor Frankenstein, this is amazing," Josie said, her voice full of exaggerated awe.

"You know my name, my dear?" One thick, dark eyebrow rose up.

"Of course. In the land the where I come from, you are widely known for your innovative discoveries and theories. But this, this will turn the scientific community upside down."

"Indeed it will." Frankenstein favored her with a genuine smile, displaying stained, slightly crooked teeth. "But I am not yet done. Belua is merely the first step. Before I can demonstrate my work to the world, I must construct something more aesthetically pleasing. Belua's countenance has a tendency to frighten those with weaker constitutions."

"Belua. That's Latin, isn't it?"

Neil couldn't figure what she was up to, but at least no one was getting killed. He glanced at Mulroony's lifeless body.

No one else, anyway.

"So you are a scholar as well as a beautiful woman? It means monster. Quite apropos, don't you think? A gentle word with such a terrible meaning. It is like Belua himself, a monster on the outside, but with the mind and heart of a poet. Literally." Frankenstein chuckled at his joke.

"Like two sides of a coin, or the dark and light of the human soul."

"How right you are, my dear." He looked at her with more than casual interest. "You intrigue me. Perhaps we should continue our conversation in private." He took Josie by the arm and guided her towards the doorway.

"You're not taking her anywhere." Neil ran forward and grabbed Josie, pulling her out of Frankenstein's grasp.

"Idiot. This doesn't concern you."

The doctor took hold of Neil's left arm and twisted it violently up and back. A loud *Pop!* filled Neil's ears and a thousand rockets exploded in his shoulder. He cried out and fell to the floor, landing on the injured arm and sending another bolt of pain through his body.

The last thing he heard before the world went dark was Josie's voice.

"Neil, help!"

Neil's first conscious thoughts revolved around pain. His body ached, a bass drum pounded in his head, and his left shoulder sent out waves of agony that hammered their way down his arm to his fingertips, and across his chest to his lungs.

"Oh, damn." Tears ran down his cheeks as he used his right arm to lever himself to a sitting position.

His movements sent the whole world swaying around him, leading him to believe he suffered from a concussion, but then a hand grabbed his leg.

"Hey, man, don't move."

Neil tried to focus through the dizziness. A set of iron bars formed a barrier ten feet in front of him. More bars pressed against his back. He and found Speedy staring back at him.

"Where are we? What happened?" He glanced around the cell. Ricky and MC also sat nearby. "Where're Josie and Chantrelle?" He tried to push himself up. Another blinding flash of pain hit him, and the floor tilted under him again.

He took in a deep, shaky breath, and realized that as long as he sat still, the pain in his shoulder settled down to a throbbing ache rather than a full-blown explosion of hurt.

"We're in a cage," Speedy quietly told him. "This is where we all woke up. You been out the longest. I think your shoulder's dislocated. Happened to me once, man. Hurts like a mother."

"Frankenstein did it. He took Josie. Where are they?"

"Don't know, brother. He's got Chantrelle, too."

"We gotta get out of here and find them," Neil said, hating the way his voice cracked from the pain.

"Good idea, McGenius." Ricky let loose a derisive snort. "What are you gonna do, pick the lock, open the door, and then kill that thing, all with one arm?"

Neil followed Ricky's finger. Frankenstein's monster—*Belua, he's called Belua*—sat in a large wooden chair in one corner of the long room. His eyes were closed and he appeared to be deep asleep, but Neil doubted the monster was that poor of a guard.

"Well, if we can't get out, maybe we can figure out what the doctor's up to."

"It looks like we're in a lab of some kind, but I can't tell what any of the machines are for," Speedy told him.

"I probably could, if I could get up and look around. Damn this arm." Neil pounded his good fist against the metal floor of the cage, and then choked back a scream as the movement sent another ripple of fire through him.

"Wimp. Come here, I'll fix your shoulder." MC opened his eyes and looked at Neil. "Don't worry, Mister G-Wiz, I ain't gonna fuck with you. You did pretty good back there for a skinny-ass whitebread."

Speedy helped Neil stand up, and they moved carefully over to where MC sat.

"This ain't gonna be fun, Dexter. Grab somethin' with your good hand, and hold on tight as you can. I gotta pop this sucker back in."

Neil took hold of a metal bar, as MC gripped his left arm at the elbow and just below the shoulder. MC twisted the arm sharply, pulling at the same time.

The new insult to his muscles, tendons, and ligaments was too much for him to bear.

He had time for one hoarse scream before the welcome blackness of oblivion claimed him again.

~

This time he woke up fully aware of his surroundings. He clenched his teeth and flexed his left arm a fraction, expecting a shattering bolt of pain. Instead, he found he could move it; not as well as normal, but the pain had died down to a throbbing, burning soreness.

"Hey, I can move it again."

"Good for you. Now how's about findin' a way to do the bird?"

"Do the..." Neil started to ask, but Ricky interrupted him.

"He means get us the hell out of here."

"Oh."

Neil looked through the bars. All the machines seemed home-made, with tubes and wires and dials all over the place.

It really is a mad scientist's lair. Frankenstein probably built it all himself. There's no resemblance to any scientific equipment I've seen before, even in museums.

The majority of the machinery occupied two walls of the lab, while two large vats took up a good portion of the center area, just past their cell. Heavy drop cloths covered the tops of both containers, making it impossible to tell what they held.

An assortment of wires, cables, and tubes ran between the tanks, which both had pumps attached to them. The sound of the pump motors, along with the gurgle of flowing liquid, added to the general hum coming from the lab's machinery.

"Maybe we can get Belua to tell us what Frankenstein's plans are."

"Sittin' here with our thumbs up our asses hasn't helped, so why not?" Ricky muttered.

"Belua." Neil raised his voice to a shout. "Belua, can you hear me?"

The creature opened his eyes and looked up at them. "Hear you fine."

"Why is Frankenstein keeping us here? Where are the girls?"

"The master has need, maybe. Maybe not."

"Has need? Has need of what?"

"Parts, like me," Belua said, holding up his arm to show his stitched-together appendage. "Make more. More like Belua."

Icy fingers shivered up Neil's spine.

"Belua, why does the doctor want to make more people like you?"

"Explain, want to, can't find words. Ideas very strong here," Belua pointed to his head, "but not come out here," he added, indicating his mouth.

"Too long without oxo...oxy...oxygen."

"Belua, where we come from there are doctors who can help you speak normally again. Let us go, and we'll take you back there with us."

"No, Belua cannot go. Must stay. Doctor gives Belua his present tonight." Before Neil could ask what the present was, Belua stood up and walked out, leaving them alone with the gurgling pumps and gently buzzing machines.

"Nice try, bro, but we ain't gonna be talkin' our way outta this," Speedy said.

Ricky sat back against the bars and closed his eyes again. "Wake me when the party starts, I'm beat."

"Sleeping might be a good idea for all of us," Neil said.

"Don't know if I'll be able to fall asleep, knowing that freak has Chantrelle locked away somewhere." Speedy lay back, arms crossed behind his head.

Neil leaned up against the bars. He hadn't thought he could sleep, either, but exhaustion quickly claimed him. His last thoughts before he drifted off were of Josie.

Josie, hang in there. I didn't save you from an entire alien race just to have some two-bit evil scientist kill you.

CHAPTER 8

Amy

No sleep for the weary tonight, Amy thought, as they walked through the deserted mall.

Traci had been missing for over two hours. The search had spread from the Save-Mart to the whole mall. JD and Amy, along with Jeanne and Boz, were presently walking down one of the side hallways on the first floor.

Zombies continued to pound on the glass doors at the end of the hall. Similar hordes waited at every entrance and exit to the mall. Their constant moaning had everyone on edge as they searched.

"Are you sure they can't break through?" Amy asked JD.

"To be honest, no. But the doors have held for hours, since before we got here even, so I think they're probably safe. Besides, that's why we're carrying these," he added, holding up his shotgun. Boz had one as well.

"Right, because those shotguns are going to make a big difference against ten thousand hungry zombies," muttered Jeanne. Dark circles highlighted puffy flesh below her chocolate-colored eyes, and the makeup she'd applied earlier couldn't hide her sallow tones.

Amy knew she looked just as bad. The reflection staring back at her from the store windows was a pale, gaunt shadow of the girl who'd entered the carnival just a few hours ago.

"You could have stayed at the Save-Mart and waited for us," Boz told her.

"By myself? That would be even worse. I'm fine right here, thank you," Jeanne said, gripping Boz's arm.

In the quiet of the empty mall, the ratcheting of a rifle bolt being pulled back made them all jump. Amy turned her head so fast it actually hurt her neck. Her heart jumped, but it wasn't a living corpse facing them from the end of the hallway

Traci Trachsel, dressed in expensive-looking slacks and blouse, held a rifle aimed at them. Her arms were rock-steady, and her tight smile only accentuated the crazed look in her eyes.

"Well, this must be my lucky day. All four of you together. Saves me the trouble of hunting for you."

Traci's tone made Amy's stomach flip. *She's more dangerous right now than the monsters outside.*

"Can she use that thing?" JD whispered to Boz.

His voice carried in the cavernous space, and Traci answered him before Boz could say anything.

"Yes, JD, I can use it. Daddy belongs to a gun club, and he taught me how to shoot. This is a bolt-action .22, almost no kick, so even a pretty little thing like me can fire it over and over. Now, who wants to be the first target?"

Traci swung the gun back and forth in a small arc.

"Put the gun down, Traci. There's no need for this. We can forget it ever happened." Amy tried to keep her voice casual.

"No need for this? Forget it ever happened? I thought you were smarter than that, Cherry."

She pointed the gun at Amy and placed her finger on the trigger. "This is your fault. You were the one who dumped Ricky Roberts. So even though everyone agreed he and I should be together, they also secretly thought of me as his second choice. I worked hard to overcome that. Now your Miss Goody-Goody act is rubbing off on my other friends. Well, I won't let you ruin my life. Say goodbye, bitch."

The gun's report reached Amy's ears at the same time a bulldozer slammed into her body. The mall disappeared in flares of light, taking all her breath with it.

A second flash of pain blossomed in her skull. For a moment, her lungs refused to work, then she heaved in a deep breath as her chest started up again. Her vision cleared, giving her a view of ceiling tiles and fluorescent lights.

"Am I shot? How bad is it?" Amy couldn't feel the hole in her chest she knew must be there. *I must be in shock.*

"No, she missed," Boz sat beside her. "As soon as I heard her say 'Goodbye,' I knew she was gonna pull the trigger, so I gave you a cross-body block. Sorry about that."

"Sorry? You just saved my life. I should be thanking you."

Boz helped her to her feet. Looking around at the empty hall, she asked, "Where's JD?"

"JD fired a shot into the ceiling over her head. She dropped her gun and ran away. As soon as he knew you were all right, he took off after her."

As Boz told her this, JD came back down the hall. Behind him were Fred and Zach, holding onto a struggling Traci. "We were coming to find you guys when she ran right into us," Freddy told them. "Everyone else is already back at the Save-Mart."

Amy held out her arms as JD reached her. He grabbed her and pulled her against his chest.

"Thank god you're all right," he whispered in a shaky voice. "I don't know what I would have done if you'd gotten hurt."

"I'm fine. Although I never want to play football against Boz. Let's go back to the Save-Mart, I just want to sit down for a while."

JD went over to Boz and shook his hand. "I can't thank you enough. If

you ever need a favor, I'm there for you. Just ask."

"Don't sweat it. I was more worried that I hurt her when I tackled her. She's pretty tough. I gave her one of my best shots and she's still standing."

"Yeah, that's my girl, a real brute," JD said with a smile.

"Uh, guys, I think we have a problem," Chris said, pointing down the hall towards the entrance.

Amy turned to see what he was talking about, and immediately wished she hadn't. A spider web of cracks covered the glass of one door, and the whole thing bowed ominously inwards from the weight of the zombies pressing against it.

"Oh, shit. Traci's shot broke the glass," Jeanne said.

As if her words completed a magic spell, the glass shattered inward and the zombies crashed through, the pressure of their bodies sending the first few tumbling to the floor, while dozens more streamed in over the fallen forms.

The stench of the corpses, some desiccated like mummies, many more of them bloated, rotting, slimy, and covered in fungus, filled the hallway with an almost solid cloud of rancid foulness.

"Run," JD shouted, grabbing Amy's hand and pulling her along. More creatures pushed their way through, until the mass of the zombies finally exceeded the ability of the doors to hold them and the undead swarmed in like crazed fans at a rock concert.

"Grab a gun," JD called out as they entered the Save-Mart. "The zombies are in."

Pandemonium reigned for a few moments as people scrambled for guns, all the while shouting and asking questions.

JD lined up everyone, even Traci, facing the entrance to the mall. "Aim for the heads."

Amy and Jeanne stayed back, letting the people who knew how to shoot move to the front. Everyone waited for the shambling horde to get close enough for the guns to be effective.

Hundreds of animated cadavers, in all states of decomposition, stumbled, crawled, and lurched towards them. Although deficient in motor skills, they moved faster than Amy remembered from the late night movies, leaving a trail of maggots and rotted flesh in their wake.

Amy shuddered as she imagined their yellowed teeth sinking into her, tearing chunks of skin and muscle, eating her like a shark eats a seal.

Stop it, she mentally shouted at herself, but it was no use. In an effort to keep her mind distracted, she sorted through the ammunition, arranging it by caliber. If she couldn't shoot, she could at least do something useful.

The zombie stench pounded them, an effective enemy all on its own just by triggering everyone's gag reflex. Compared to the wave of death-smell, the acidic odor of fresh puke was a cap gun competing against a cannon.

When the zombies were still over fifty feet away, and the aroma of putrefaction had Amy's eyes watering, JD gave the order to fire. In the confined, echoing space, the shots were deafening.

Several corpses went down, heads bursting like over-ripe tomatoes. Others, victims of body or limb shots, staggered a moment and then continued forward. JD and Boz, with their shotguns, were able to do more damage, blowing off arms and legs, leaving gaping craters in chests, and exploding skulls.

With each shot fired, the odor of death and decay grew exponentially worse as the bodies released more pent-up gases and vile liquids.

Amy reached out and gripped Jeanne's hand. She couldn't hear, didn't bother to speak, but saw her thoughts mirrored in her friend's eyes.

We're not going to make it, there's too many of them.

Jeanne gave Amy's hand a hard squeeze and then pointed at JD and Boz. Amy nodded. They needed to get away before the zombies got too close. She crawled forward to where JD knelt on the cold tile floor, grabbing his foot and shaking it. He jerked away, and then scuffled back to her so she could put her mouth against his ear.

"You can't kill them all," Amy shouted.

JD looked at the zombies, bit his lip, and nodded. He started going from person to person, tapping and kicking them, making running motions with his fingers. No one argued. Gathering their guns and ammo, they retreated to the back of the store, only to find they had nowhere else to go.

"Now what?" Traci voice bordered on hysterical. "We're fucking trapped here, we're gonna die."

"Maybe you should have thought about that before you shot the doors down." Chris's eyes were wide, his long hair a wild tangle sticking out in all directions.

"Quiet," JD shouted. "We need to think. This is a two-story building. That means there has to be a way up to the roof, a service ladder or stair case. We get up there, we can bar the doors and then wait for morning."

"The escalators are over that way," Freddy said, pointing to his left. "But we'll have to hurry before the dead crew cuts us off."

They raced through the aisles, crashing into shelves and knocking over racks of toys and household goods. Approaching the escalators, they found a group of zombies already blocking their way. JD, Boz, and Fred fired at them on the run, trying to open a space in the crowd of corpses. Then they were too close to use the guns. Everyone started kicking, punching, and pushing, desperately trying to avoid being bitten.

Traci screamed as a zombie clamped its mouth on her shoulder. Boz put his shotgun against the creature's forehead and turned the thing's skull into red and yellow paste.

JD made it to the first step of the escalator, pulling Amy along with him. Boz practically threw Jeanne, and then Traci, forward onto the steps. Amy had to grab Traci's good arm to keep her from collapsing.

"Hurry up," he called to the others. He stepped to the side as Cliff, Danny, and Fred ran past him and up the metal stairs of the motionless escalator, followed by Chris and then Dave.

"Zach, move it," Boz yelled. He punctuated his shout with another blast from his shotgun.

At the top, Jeanne supported the half-conscious Traci, while JD leaned on the railing and fired his shotgun into the horde of shambling corpses below.

Shuffling, moaning zombies filled the bottom floor, all of them homing in on the humans. So far they hadn't figured out how to walk up the stairs, but Amy knew it was just a matter of time.

Zach let out an agonized cry as a zombie pulled him down from behind. The swarm converged on him, digging at him with putrescent fingers that broke off as often as they got a grip, and tearing at him with their jaws like starving hyenas. His anguished calls for help cut off in mid-scream as the mass of bodies covered him.

"No!" JD fired again, and from halfway down the escalator came the answering roar of Boz's gun.

A zombie head rose from the crowd, mouth filled with red, dripping hunks of flesh. Amy turned away, her stomach threatening to empty itself again.

Several zombies started climbing and walking over the mound of feeding creatures, making their way up the first few steps of the escalator. Boz placed a few rounds into the leaders. Their bodies fell and slowed the advance of the hideous monsters behind them, but not enough to make a difference. Finally, he turned and sprinted up the steps.

"I tried to save him, but I couldn't shoot enough of them." A mixture of tears and sweat dampened his cheeks.

"It wasn't your fault," Jeanne told him, clutching his arm and pulling him away from the escalator. "C'mon, stay with me, we have to save ourselves now."

Boz's feet were moving in the right direction, but he kept looking over his shoulder, back at the corpses slowly and awkwardly mounting the steps.

"This way," JD yelled. "Our best bet is the customer service and pickup area."

Amy had to run as hard as she could to keep up with him as he led them through the Young Misses section. She wondered how he managed to keep his feet. His knee had to be killing him by now.

As she hurried past the assorted skirts, dresses, and pants, she saw a black gown and a memory of the black Halloween outfit she had bought flashed

through her head. At that moment, it seemed likely she might never get to put it on for him.

Can't think like that. Got to trust that we'll get out of this alive. Unfortunately, she didn't believe her own words.

When they reached the customer service area, JD led them down a short hallway. "How do you know where you're going?" Amy panted.

"I worked maintenance one summer at the Whitebridge Mall. This is how we got to the roof's access stairwell. I'm hoping this mall is the same, or we're screwed."

They came to a door that bore the ubiquitous Authorized Personnel Only sign. JD tried the handle, but it didn't turn.

"Step back," Boz said. He pumped a round into his shotgun and fired at the knob. The heavy shot tore a fist-size chunk out of the wooden door where it met the frame, the mangled handle dropping to the floor as the door flew open, revealing a staircase up to the roof.

"Boz, go first, there's probably another locked door at the top," JD said. "Amy, you and Jeanne help Traci up next. Let's go."

Amy looped Traci's good arm over her shoulder while Jeanne grabbed her by the waist, and together they half-dragged her up the single flight of stairs. Above them the shotgun roared again as Boz reached the top door.

They emerged onto a gravel rooftop. The pinkish sky startled Amy, and she realized the entire night had passed. The rising sun illuminated the buildings of what appeared to be a large suburban town.

"Over here, give everyone else room to get out," Boz called to them.

JD came up last, using the railing to keep the weight off his bad leg. He slammed the door shut behind him. "We need something to block this door." He slid to the ground, his face white and sweaty.

Boz, Dave, Chris, and Fred spread out, searching for anything they could use as a blockade, but came up empty-handed.

"Dude, the roof is totally clean," Chris said to JD.

"That's it, we're screwed now," Dave moaned. He sat down on the white gravel, his arms wrapped around his knees.

"No, we're not," JD said angrily. "We'll figure something out." He used the doorknob to pull himself up.

"Yeah? Tell that to Zach," Dave retorted. "They ate him like a goddamn roast beef. I don't wanna die like that."

JD started to say something, but Chris stopped him. "Ssshhh. What's that noise?"

"What? I don't hear anything," Danny said, looking around.

"No, I hear it, too," Jeanne told them. "It's like hissing."

"Oh, great, what's next, a giant snake?" Dave's voice cracked as he spoke.

Everyone stopped speaking and began walking around.

"It's coming from Traci," Fred said.

They all turned and looked at the unconscious girl, where she sat propped up against the metal housing of an air conditioning unit. Freddy started pawing through her pockets.

"Bingo," he cried, pulling a walkie-talkie from her coat. "She must have grabbed it in the Save-Mart."

"See if you can get through to anyone," JD said, hobbling over.

Freddy clicked the talk button. "Hello, is anyone out there? Can anyone hear me?" As he repeated his message, he switched channels on the multi-band unit. After seven or eight tries, a voice responded.

"This is a military channel. Unidentified speaker, state your name and location. I repeat, this is a military channel. Identify yourself."

"We're saved!" Amy couldn't help the shout of joy that erupted from her throat, a shout echoed by several of the people around her.

Freddy frantically signaled for them to be quiet.

"Hello, we're trapped on the roof of the mall. It's full of zombies. We killed some of them, but there're too many. We need help. Can anyone get us out of here?"

"Affirmative, how many of you are there? We have rescue units standing by."

"There're ten of us, one is injured."

"Stand by, a helicopter will be there shortly. Out."

"Unbelievable. Way to go, Fred," JD cried, slapping his friend on the back.

"We made it, we're gonna be safe, right?" Chris asked.

Boz shook his head. "Then why aren't we back at the carnival?"

"I don't think this is the end. We have to figure out how to kill the monsters, not just get away from them." Jeanne said.

Amy had a sudden idea. She tugged at JD's sleeve. "How did they do it in the movies?"

"What do you mean?"

Amy spoke quickly, sure she was on to something. "In the zombie movies. How did they kill them? We used silver to kill the werewolves. Boz killed the demon with a cross. Neil used science to defeat the aliens. What kills zombies?"

"We already know that. Shoot them in the head, cut their heads off, or burn them to a crisp," Danny told her. "What are we supposed to do, go around and burn every zombie in the world? That would take months. Or maybe we should just drop a few nukes?"

"No, wait, I think Amy's right." Cliff said. "What she means is not how to kill each zombie, but to stop whatever's making them in the first place." He

scratched his chin. “But the movies don’t all end the same way. Sometimes it’s a bacteria or something from outer space that creates them. But in other movies it’s toxic waste or radiation.”

JD nodded. “All we have to do is find out what created the zombies, and then we’ll know how to stop them.”

Before anyone could respond, a loud *whup-whup-whup* shattered the quiet of the early dawn. A large helicopter, the U.S. Army insignia on its sides, swept past them and then returned to settle onto the roof. The bay door slid open and a figure dressed in combat fatigues, white helmet, and dark goggles waved to them.

“Hurry, we have more survivors to pick up,” the man shouted.

JD and Boz picked up the unconscious Traci as the rest of them hurried over to the helicopter. A soldier belted them into safety harnesses, and strapped Traci to a stretcher. A corpsman went to work on her, setting up an IV with plasma and antibiotics, then cleansing and dressing her shoulder.

As the helicopter took off and banked into a turn, the helmeted officer turned to JD and asked, “How did you get up there?”

JD told him they’d broken into the mall to get away from the zombies. Then he explained how they’d made their way to the roof, destroying as many zombies as they could.

“You only lost one person? You guys did a great job,” the officer said.

Next to Amy, Boz muttered something under his breath about it ‘not being good enough.’

“Has anyone figured out how to stop them?” Cliff asked.

“No. We don’t even know where they came from. It started yesterday, about this same time. All of a sudden, corpses began coming to life. At first it was just in the southern states, but it quickly spread all over the country, and now we’re getting reports that it’s happening in Europe and Asia, too.”

“We think we know how to stop the zombies, or at least we’ve got a theory,” JD said. “Has anything unusual happened in the last two or three days, especially close by where the zombies were first seen? A meteor shower, or maybe a toxic spill?”

“I don’t know, but I can check.” Leaning forward, the officer repeated the question to the co-pilot, who got on the radio. The noise of the helicopter prevented Amy from hearing their conversation, and she chewed her nails, something she hadn’t done since middle school, until the officer leaned back and answered JD.

“There was a small meteor impact in New York, a town called Whitebridge, just after midnight two days ago. How’d you know?”

“A long story. Have someone test that meteor for a virus, or a bacteria, or maybe some kind of radiation or chemical that it’s giving off. That’ll be what made the zombies come alive.”

"Kid, if you're right, you're gonna be a hero," the officer said. He leaned forward again, this time speaking into the radio himself. When he finished, he turned around again.

"I've sent a message to our research unit, they're heading to Whitebridge right now. Hopefully we'll have an answer in a few hours. In the meantime, we'll take you back to our base camp, get you some hot food and showers."

JD leaned back in his seat, putting his arm around Amy. "Now we just have to..."

JD's face blurred as the world faded away on Amy.

"...wait. Oh, crap," JD yelled, jumping up from the plywood floor. They were back at the carnival.

Amy stood up as well, her legs still shaky from the helicopter vibrating and moving around her.

"That's it? It's over?" Chris asked.

"We solved how to kill the zombies," Jeanne said.

Plaster models of zombies filled the room, some of them reaching forward as if to grab someone, others holding gross representations of body parts and organs in red-painted hands.

Traci, who lay on the floor, moaned and opened her eyes. Her shoulder was still bandaged, but no IV protruded from her arm. Her bloody shirt and coat lay nearby, and Jeanne went over to help her sit up and get dressed.

Of Zach there was no sign.

"Okay, guys, let's get the hell out of here. There're more rooms left." JD took Amy's hand and limped towards the Exit door.

"What about Ricky's group? What if they're not back yet?" Boz asked.

"We'll wait twenty minutes and then go in looking for them." JD said.

Amy looked at her watch. It was twenty-seven minutes after midnight.

CHAPTER 9

Neil

The echoing crash of metal on stone woke startled Neil into full wakefulness. Dr. Frankenstein strode into the lab, pulling on a pair of heavy rubber gloves. Behind him, Belua pushed a large, sheet-covered gurney. Underneath the cloth, the distinctive shape of a female body was plainly visible.

Belua rolled the gurney up to one of the large vats, while Frankenstein busied himself with various pieces of equipment. He moved from one machine to another, adjusting knobs, turning dials, and marking information down in a notebook.

At one point, he turned to the monster and said, "The readings look good. Go and get the other one. We shan't be needing her."

Belua left, leaving Frankenstein to work on his Rube Goldberg-esque inventions. Gradually the doctor's activities brought him to the two vats next to the cage. He did a quick check on the readings of one, and then began to flick switches and fiddle with knobs on the other.

Neil leaned forward. "Doctor Frankenstein, what is it that you're doing?"

Frankenstein looked up and smiled, but the distracted look never left his eyes. "Ah, so you are curious? Well, I shall be glad to explain. It is not often I get the chance to discuss my work." He returned to his readings, but his voice carried up to the prisoners.

"I created Belua from the parts of other men. That is why I was so glad you and the others found your way here. The townspeople have begun to get suspicious of me, especially now that my work requires fresh, living tissue in addition to corpses."

Neil took a moment before speaking, not wanting his true feelings to come out. The man had done what no one in the history of the world had ever been able to do, but he was a butcher, a defiler of the human body. Truly, one monster had created another.

"You've got Belua. Why do you need more bodies? You can prove to the world you've created life."

"Belua is only the first step. He is a rough drawing, not the final painting. I must refine my methods further, until one day my creatures will be identical to ordinary humans."

"But what's the point?" Ricky spoke up from the back of the cage. "Why do you need to create people anyway?"

Frankenstein set his notebook down on a nearby table.

"Think of the possibilities. Armies created from the remains of their dead

companions. People would no longer have to suffer from blindness, paralysis, or accidents. We could eliminate the subjugation of people from foreign lands by building a race of slaves. And all without harming any living beings. Instead of burying the freshly dead, we can recycle them.

"And, of course, there is still one more thing I need to accomplish," Frankenstein added.

"What's that?" This time Speedy posed the question.

"Why, the miracle of procreation of course. Once I show that my creatures are human in every way, people will have to bow before my genius. That is why Belua needs a mate."

With an elaborate wave of his arm, Frankenstein pulled the cloth off one of the tanks. There, immersed in bubbling vat of yellowish fluid, was the body of a woman, complete except for her head. The edges of flesh around the neck showed pinkish-white, and the stumps and tubes of her windpipe, spinal cord, and blood vessels were clearly visible.

Speedy turned away, choking and holding his hands over his mouth. Ricky just closed his eyes. But Neil forced himself to look, mainly to reassure himself it wasn't Josie laying there in a pool of life-supporting fluids.

"Behold! Less than one day ago, this young girl lay near death in an alley. A whore, beaten and left to die for the few coins in her purse. When I came across the body, her skull was crushed, her heart barely beating.

"Fate provided me with a fresher corpse than I could have ever hoped to remove from any cold house of the dead. Now, as a reward for his service, I've allowed Belua to choose his mate. Let us see how he has chosen."

Frankenstein walked over to the gurney and whipped back the sheet, exposing the naked body that lay strapped to the metal table.

Josie's body.

"NO!" screamed Neil. "You can't do this. I'll kill you!" He banged his hands on the bars, ignoring the pain from his injured shoulder.

"I gather that this one was rather special to you. My condolences. Perhaps you can take solace from knowing that your lady will live to see another day, with a younger and more appealing body, while you and your friends will soon be nothing more than parts in my freezer."

At that moment, the door to the lab opened and Belua came in, carrying an unconscious Chantrelle in his arms.

"Belua, there you are. So you chose brains over beauty. I thought you might. No matter, she will soon have the body of a goddess to go along with her fine intelligence. Put that one in the cage with the others, and then help me prepare for surgery."

Belua set Chantrelle down on an empty bench. Using a large metal key, he unlocked the door of the cage. Neil tried to slip past the giant, but Belua shoved him back in, propelling him into Ricky and Speedy and sending them

all to the floor. He tossed Chantrelle's body inside, and then slammed the door closed.

Speedy crawled over to her still form, patting her face. "Hey, *chiquita, mi Cali*, wake up, c'mon, *hableme*, talk to me."

Neil returned to the front of the cage. Hot tears flowed down his face. Frankenstein and Belua were busy setting up a tray of surgical instruments next to Josie's gurney.

"Stop! You can't do this. Please, isn't there anyone else you can use?" Neil sank to his knees, clutching at the cold steel bars.

Frankenstein spoke without looking up. "It is not my decision to make. This is to be Belua's Eve, his life mate. How could I choose for him? He deserves that right, as all men do."

Neil turned and looked at the others, hoping one of them would have an idea of how to stop Frankenstein.

Chantrelle had regained consciousness, and was crying and holding on to Speedy, who stroked her hair. Ricky sat in a far corner, head down, not saying or looking at anything.

On the other side of the cage, MC stared at Belua, his eyes narrowed and his lips pressed tightly together. Seeing no help behind him, Neil returned his gaze to Frankenstein. The doctor held up a long needle with some type of fluid.

"Watch closely, young sir. I am preparing a solution which, when injected, will paralyze the young woman's diaphragm, preventing her from breathing. This is essential, as it would be inhumane to operate on her while she was alive. Even with anesthesia, the trauma would be too great."

"What do you mean, operate? What are you going to do, you butcher?"

"Why, it must be obvious by now. I intend to take this young woman's head and place it on the other body."

A low moan escaped Neil. He'd suspected as much, but his mind had refused to accept it. Now that it had been stated out loud, he couldn't hide from the truth.

MC came over to the bars. "Hey doc, you nuthin' but a jabroni, you hear what I'm sayin'? Open this cage, and I be showin' you what it feels like havin' yo' head separated from yo' body, how's about dat?"

Frankenstein laughed. "I've heard it said the negroid races were less intelligent. Your actions prove the rumors correct. Now, be silent or I will have Belua silence you permanently."

MC growled and banged his fists on the bars. Ignoring him, Frankenstein jabbed the syringe into Josie's arm. Her mouth flew open, and she gasped for breath. Her chest spasmed once, twice; then, with a final exhalation, it went still.

Frankenstein took a quick listen to Josie's chest with his stethoscope, then

continued talking, oblivious to Neil's anguish. "The toxin comes from a rare amphibian found in India. It affects only the diaphragm muscles, leaving the rest of the body unharmed."

Using a charcoal pencil, the doctor drew a line across Josie's neck, tilting the body up to extend the line downward a few inches in the back, crossing her spine and then angling upward again.

Frankenstein picked up a scalpel, and with a practiced motion made a deep slice directly along the line across the front of Josie's throat. Neil choked back burning stomach acids as thick blood welled up from the wound. Speedy and Chantrelle, looking as pale and shocked as Neil felt, joined MC by the bars. Ricky never moved from the back of the cage.

With rapid, efficient movements, Frankenstein cut through the muscle tissue and esophagus. Belua turned the body over, allowing Frankenstein to extend the incision across the back of the neck. He then made a lateral incision several inches long on each side of the spine, and retracted the two resulting flaps of skin to expose the backbone.

"This next phase requires extreme precision, as I slice through all the tissue layers and nerves of the spine."

Frankenstein talked as he worked, playing the role of professor. "While Belua collects the spinal fluids, I sever the remaining tendons and ligaments, and phase one is complete."

Frankenstein lifted his hands, Josie's head and neck balanced in his grasp.

The scene was a sucker-punch to Neil's gut; thankfully, she faced away from him, otherwise he might have fainted right there. Chantrelle bent over and vomited onto the floor of the cage.

Frankenstein placed Josie's severed head into the second nutrient fluid bath, then he and Belua lifted the corpse of the whore onto a second table.

Frankenstein continued his morbid lecture. "I think you will find this stage most interesting, young lad. Thanks to the anti-rejection and regeneration serums I've developed, by this time tomorrow Eve will able to walk and move normally, her only discomfort that of the external stitching. Can your scientists make such a claim?"

Neil didn't respond, partly because he didn't trust himself to speak, and partly because he couldn't refute the doctor's words. Modern science couldn't even begin to approach what the mad doctor had been able to do with a steady hand and simple chemicals found in nature.

And don't forget the willingness to butcher and kill innocent humans. But then, there were probably hundreds of scientists in the real world who would gladly break some laws, sacrifice people, in order to obtain the ability to duplicate Frankenstein's work. Such was the curse of scientific curiosity.

Completing his preparation of the whore's body, Frankenstein removed Josie's head and neck from the bath and fitted it neatly into place.

It took Frankenstein less than three hours to attach Josie's head to its new home, but each minute seemed like an eternity to Neil. His fingers moved with astonishing speed and precision as he used a special homemade adhesive to connect nerves and smaller blood vessels, and a combination of stitching and adhesive on the larger vessels and connective tissues. Then he began the painstaking process of stitching up the thick muscle groups and finally the skin itself.

When he finished, Frankenstein accepted a tray of syringes from Belua. "Now for the final step," he commented to the caged audience. "First I inject the spinal fluid back into its tube, and then a healthy dose of my anti-rejection serum."

"How do you bring her back to life?" Neil asked.

"Electricity, my good friend. Simple electricity."

He snapped his fingers and Belua wheeled the table over to a bank of machines that sat against one wall. Frankenstein flipped several switches. Sparks flew, and the hum of generators filled the air, accompanied by the burning tang of ozone and overheated copper. The doctor withdrew two metal wands from a slot in the front of one of the machines, holding them carefully by their rubber grips.

It's a primitive defibrillator. Neil felt a sudden surge of admiration, and more than a little jealousy. Evil or not, the man standing in front of them was one of the most brilliant human beings to ever walk the earth, in any reality.

Frankenstein placed the two rods against Josie/Eve's chest, just under her left breast. He nodded to Belua, who pushed a button. The machine emitted a sharp buzzing sound and the body jerked. Frankenstein placed his stethoscope against the girl's chest and listened.

"Excellent." He put the electrodes away and turned the machine off. He stepped to the side, allowing the unwilling spectators to see the rise and fall of the body's well-endowed chest.

Neil's heart was a jackhammer in his chest. *He did it! She's alive. But will it be Josie? Will her brain be the same? And what's going to happen when she realizes what's been done to her?*

"So, young man, do you still doubt my ability to triumph over death itself, to create life from cold flesh? Now I must leave you alone for a time. I have other work to do, and Eve's body needs to rest before I waken it. When I return, I will select from among you those whose parts I need for my next creation. You, my friend, may be lucky enough to keep his head."

Frankenstein smiled at Neil and left the room, his laughter echoing from the stone walls of the laboratory. Belua followed close on his heels.

Neil tore his gaze away from Josie/Eve and sat with his back against the bars, his head buried against his knees to hide his tears. No one said a word.

Time passed, each of the prisoners lost in their own thoughts. When MC

finally spoke, Neil's heart gave a triple roll and his body jerked, and he realized that somewhere along the line he'd drifted off.

"Crazy mofo ain't gettin' away wit' dis," MC growled, running a large hand over his shiny, bald head.

"I ain't stayin' in this cage like no damn zoo gorilla. Mitchell Clark's mamma didn't raise no slave."

"Give it a rest, MC," Ricky said, his voice low and despondent. "We can't get out. This is it, we're gonna be killed and chopped up for parts. The only one who's gonna know what happens to us is brain-boy over there, 'cause they'll keep his head. Probably stick it on your body. The rest of us will end up in jars, like Tammi Bruno."

Ricky shook his head, slapped his hand against the floor. "Goddamn JD Cole. This is his fault. All we had to do was sit and wait until someone rescued us, but he had to send us to another room."

"C'mon, Ricky, we can still get out of this." Speedy pointed at the cage door. "They gotta open that door before they kill us. And there's four of us against two of them. You can take the doctor, you're bigger than he is. The rest of us can jump the monster. At least we'd have a chance. It's better than sitting here, waitin' to die like dogs."

"Speedy's right, we have to at least try," Neil said. "He can't do anything worse to us than what he's already got planned."

"Whatever. I don't care anymore." Ricky's eyes were dull, the flesh below them dark and sagging.

"Screw you's all," MC said. "I ain't waitin'. I'm doin' the abra-cadabra right now, and when those two freaks come back, we'll be waitin' to air their asses out. Gimme your money clip."

Ricky looked up. "My money clip? What are you gonna do with that?" he asked, removing the cash and handing over the monogrammed silver clip.

MC flipped open the tiny knife blade, good for cleaning under your nails but not much more.

"When we played Syracuse last year, and we was losin' bad, what did coach tell us at half time?" MC asked.

When Ricky didn't answer, Speedy said, "He told us to do what we had to do to win the game."

"And what did I do?" MC snaked his arm through the bars, trying to get the blade into the keyhole.

Ricky looked up, his eyes coming to life just a little. "You cheated. You taped metal rods under your pads, so that when you hit someone you knocked 'em senseless."

"Damn straight. It's only cheatin' if you get caught, and I didn't. That's what they teach you in the 'hood, boys and twats. You does what you has to in order to survive. If I can get outta handcuffs with a bitch's hoop earring, I

can get outta this cage."

With slow twists of his hand, accompanied by a jiggling motion, MC worked the knife in the keyhole. It took some time, but eventually the tumblers turned with a loud click and the antique lock opened up.

"Yea, daddy." He tossed the knife back to Ricky and pushed the door open.

Neil stepped aside until everyone rushed out, wary of bumping into someone with his sore shoulder.

"Okay, what next?" Speedy asked.

His answer was the sound of the laboratory door opening.

CHAPTER 10

Neil

"Well, it seems you're more resourceful than I thought." Frankenstein's voice conveyed more bemusement than worry. Neil's hopes for escape plummeted when he saw why: both the doctor and Belua carried large pistols.

"Belua, please make sure our guests don't cause any trouble." Frankenstein approached Josie's prone form while Belua kept his gun trained on the captives. Even MC remained still, although he clenched and unclenched his fists, over and over.

Frankenstein picked up the final syringe from the tray and injected it into Josie/Eve's arm. He gently slapped her cheeks, first one side and then the other. Neil watched as Josie slowly woke up, like a patient emerging from anesthesia, coughing a little and then moaning.

"There, there, my Eve. There will be some discomfort, perhaps even pain, but it will pass. Open your eyes. Slowly, slowly. Can you see me?"

A whispered answer Neil couldn't hear, but which seemed to please Frankenstein.

"Excellent. Hearing, speech, and vision all acceptable. Now, please try to move your arms."

Neil's jaw tightened at the sound of Josie's whimper.

"Yes, I know it hurts, but it is important. Bend them at the elbows. Good. Lower them. Excellent. Now, I am going to press my hand against different parts of your body. When I do, please tell me if you can feel it."

Frankenstein proceeded to tap and poke at various parts of Josie/Eve's body, each time receiving an affirmative answer.

When he finished his examination, he smiled down at her. "Well done. Everything has gone perfectly." He wrote in his notebook as he spoke. "Lay back and rest a while longer, and then we'll see about letting you sit up, all right? Very good."

Frankenstein turned around and looked at Neil and the others. "You see? Success. Now it is time for you to play your part. Belua, bring them over here. I am going to inject each of you with the same poison I used on your friend. As you saw, it is fast-acting and relatively painless. However, if you resist, Belua will be forced to shoot you, and that, I assure you, will not be pleasant."

Belua moved forward, gun raised. There was a loud *Bang* and Neil flinched, expecting to see one of his companions fall to the floor. It was only when both Belua and Frankenstein turned towards the door that Neil realized the gun hadn't fired.

Someone had kicked open the door.

JD, Boz, and Freddy came barreling into the laboratory, Cliff and Danny right behind them.

"Belua, shoot them," Frankenstein shouted, raising his own gun.

The roar of the two pistols caused Chantrelle to scream and cover her ears. Danny went down, clutching his leg, and then the unexpected reinforcements converged on Frankenstein.

Neil grabbed a beaker of liquid from a nearby bench and threw it at Belua, sending the monster's next shot high and wide. He didn't get a chance for a third.

"Better raise up," MC yelled. He charged forward like a huge, black bull, complete with flaring nostrils and crazed, bloodshot eyes. "It's time for a whuppin'."

He hit Belua from behind just as Boz rammed into the monster from the front. The three of them went down in a pile of arms and legs.

Across the room, Frankenstein landed a fist to Freddy's jaw, sending him to the ground. JD grabbed the doctor by his coat and swung him around, smashing him against a bank of machines. Frankenstein fell to his knees, dropping the gun. Cliff and Chris O'Shea grabbed him as JD scooped up the gun.

"Is everybody all right?" JD called out. People responded, but Neil didn't pay attention. He ran to Josie, grabbed her hand. Her eyes were open and full of fear.

"Josie, are you okay? Don't worry, we're gonna get you out of here, everything will be all right."

Josie's lips moved, but with all the noise Neil couldn't hear what she said. He bent closer, placing his ear over her mouth.

"Did he do it?"

Neil leaned back, not wanting to let her know the truth, knowing his face would give away any deception. "You know?"

"He told me, before he drugged me. Said when I wake up, I'll be beautiful. Body to match my brains." She gripped his hand. "Tell me."

Neil didn't try to stop his tears. "Josie, you've always been beautiful. Nothing could ever change that, it's who you are."

"Am I a monster? Like Belua?"

Before Neil could answer, Josie lifted her hands in front of her face, stared at them, and moaned. She moved them to her neck, touched the stitches.

"Oh, god."

She began to cry as she let her new limbs fall back onto the table.

"Josie, you don't look like Belua. When we get home they can take care of the scars, you won't even be able to see them."

"No. Not my body. Not *me* anymore."

The fight between MC, Boz, and Belua continued in the background, and Neil had to raise his voice above the crashing and yelling.

"That's not true. A body doesn't make a person who they are. This is like plastic surgery. The real you is in here," he touched her head, "and that hasn't changed. You're still you where it counts."

"No. Monster."

He placed his head against hers and they cried together, their tears mixing where their cheeks touched.

CHAPTER 11

JD

JD turned away from the sight of Neil's anguish. The fresh, red stitching on Josie's neck, together with the headless corpse on the other table, gave clear evidence that Neil and the others had witnessed a terrible demonstration of medical insanity. Now the time had come to end it.

Belua had put Boz out of commission with a solid punch to the chest. MC and the monster were trading blows, and it looked like the monster was gaining the upper hand.

JD held the antique pistol ready, but he couldn't get a clear shot as the two behemoths punched and crashed their way through the lab.

A line of blood ran down the side of MC's head. One of his eyes had swollen completely closed, and a lucky punch had flattened his nose into a bloody mess. None of it seemed to bother him. He threw a wild punch that rocked the monster's head back, and followed with a left hook, which the creature caught in one oversized hand. Belua closed his fingers around MC's fist, filling the air with the snapping sound of breaking bones.

MC howled in pain but didn't retreat. He thrust his good hand forward, jabbing his fingers into the monster's eyes. Belua screamed as fluids from his ruptured eyeballs flowed in yellow streams down his face.

Blinded, the monster stumbled sideways, MC still holding on to him and punching. They crashed against one of the vats of bubbling liquid. The solution spilled out, splashing the two combatants and the pumping mechanism. The motor sparked and sizzled as it created an electrical bridge to MC and the monster.

The effect was instantaneous. Both of them went rigid, and smoke rose in tendrils from their scalps. One of them—JD couldn't tell who—cried out. MC's eyes bulged out of their sockets, and Belua's burning hair stood on end.

As flames burst from the pump housing, the two combatants remained locked together, fusing into a misshapen sculpture of melting flesh.

The massive overload raced back through the rest of the machinery in the lab, creating a chain reaction of short circuits, miniature explosions, and loud popping noises. Sparks and flames shot up everywhere, the lights dimmed, and oily smoke choked the oxygen from the air.

Frankenstein used the distraction to break free from Cliff and Chris and run for the door. JD took aim and fired, the recoil of the heavy weapon whipping his wrist upwards.

Frankenstein went down, a red flower blooming on the back of his lab coat.

In the relative silence following the pistol's report, Josie's sobbing sounded unnaturally loud.

CHAPTER 12

Neil

Neil saw JD look over at him, one eyebrow raised, and he shook his head. He didn't want anyone else around right now. He held Josie's head as JD called out to Amy, Jeanne, and Traci that it was safe to come in.

Why couldn't it be Traci on this table? If she'd been here with Ricky, then Belua probably would have chosen her for his mate. After all, pretty much any guy would choose Traci's looks over Josie's brain.

Neil wiped tears from her cheeks, brought his finger to his mouth to taste the salty essence.

Then again, maybe Belua, because he was both smart and hideous, really would have preferred brains over beauty.

In his arms, Josie stopped crying and looked up at him. "Neil, I have to tell you something," she whispered. "Listen to me, and don't interrupt."

"Whatever you want," he said, stroking her hair.

"I should have said this a long time ago. You're a great guy, and I was really stupid for how I acted. I always knew you had a thing for me, but I wanted to be more than just the smart girl with the smart boyfriend, you know? I blew you off and tried to be something I wasn't. And you shouldn't have put up with it." She reached up, touched his face with fingers he'd already come to accept as hers.

"I'm sorry, Neil, I really am. I wish things had been different, that *I* had been different. It's only now, when it's too late, that I'm realizing how stupid I've been. I love you, Neil Jarvis, and I always will. Remember that, okay?"

Neil's heart did a triple roll in his chest. "I love you, too, but you make it sound like we'll never see each other again. Everything's going to be fine. Once we get home, the doctors will take care of you, and you'll hardly have any scars. And we can be together every day."

"No, we can't, Neil. Haven't you noticed? JD killed Frankenstein, and MC killed Belua, but we we're still here."

A giant centipede of dread crawled up Neil's back. "That doesn't mean anything. Maybe the doctor has another monster someplace. Or maybe we have to destroy all the machines. Once we figure it out, we'll be back home."

"You're right, Neil, but you're also wrong. There is another monster, but it's not hidden somewhere. It's right here." Josie took Neil's hand, squeezed it. "I'm the monster now, Neil. This won't end until I'm dead."

Neil looked down at Josie.

No! She can't be right, his mind screamed, even as the logic of it assaulted his heart.

"I can't believe that. I won't. Not now. Not after everything we've been through."

"Shhh. I don't want the others to know. I want my last moments to be with you." She gripped his hand tighter, began crying again. "I want you to be the last person I see, I want you in my mind and my heart when I die."

"You're not going to die. I won't let you. You're wrong, you have to be wrong. You're not a monster, you're you, just in a different body. You came here with us, you can leave with us."

"No, I can't. Think about it. What happens when we get home? How do I explain to the doctors, to my family, what happened? What he did to me can't be done in our world. The science doesn't exist yet. There's no place for me there any longer. I'm part of this world now."

"Then I'll stay here." He had no qualms about remaining in Frankenstein's world. Whatever waited for them outside the castle walls, they'd face it together. They were both smart. They'd find a way to survive and be happy.

"That won't work. If the only way to get home is for me to die, then by keeping me alive, you're condemning all of them," she indicated JD and the others, "to this place forever. I can't let you do that."

Neil wanted to think of something to say that would convince her she was wrong, but he couldn't. He put his head down, resting his face against Eve's soft breasts.

"What do I do?"

"On the tray are the syringes with Frankenstein's poison. Like he said, it will be quick and painless. Just hand me the syringe, and then hold me."

"No. I can't."

"Neil, if you really love me, you'll do this for me."

Dammit! It's not fair! But, as always, he couldn't refuse her.

Without lifting his head, Neil reached out blindly and picked up one of the metal and glass syringes. He handed it to Josie, who placed it against the flesh of her/Eve's thigh.

"Before I do this, there's one more thing I want you to do."

"What?"

"Kiss me. Before I die, I want you to kiss me. You'll be my first and only kiss."

Neil picked his head up and looked at her. She nodded, pursing her lips and closing her eyes. He bent forward, placing his lips against hers.

She may or may not have known it, but it was his first kiss as well, and he treasured each second, as the feel of her soft lips against his sent electric ripples through his body.

Time seemed to slow down to quarter speed, and he felt her body twitch for just a second as she jabbed the needle into Eve's leg and depressed the

plunger, sending the deadly poison into her system. She opened her mouth, and her tongue met his for one marvelous moment.

In that second he forgot where he was, what was happening. Then her body convulsed under him and her neck snapped back, severing the connection between them.

For a brief, fleeting instant he refused to open his eyes, believing that if he kept them closed she wouldn't die. Then her body relaxed again, and he knew she'd left him forever. He looked down at the girl he loved, her eyes open but staring blankly into space.

"Josie..."

The laboratory and his scream vanished in a swirl of color.

CHAPTER 13

JD

...I love you!"

JD looked around, momentarily off balance. Neil's forlorn cry echoed in his head and through the room.

Around him lay a shoddy-looking replica of a B-horror movie mad scientist's laboratory. Amy and Jeanne knelt by Danny, who had a deep cut on his leg where a bullet had grazed him. A half-melted wax model of the classic Frankenstein monster held MC's charred corpse within its arms.

Across the room, Neil held the hand of another wax model, this one dressed as the Bride of Frankenstein. But instead of that monster's famous features and tall, white-striped hair, this model bore the perfect likeness of Josie Dylan.

It's so realistic. Then he realized Josie's actual head and neck were still attached to the wax torso. A brief shudder passed through him. *Part of her belonged to this world, and part to the other, even in death.*

JD lowered his eyes as Neil kissed Josie's cheek, stood up, and wiped his hand across his face.

What do you say when someone's just lost the love of their life?

"So, like, what happened?" Dave asked.

"What do you think happened? We killed the fucking monsters." Neil shoved Dave out of the way and went out the Exit door.

Cliff started to go after his friend, but JD grabbed his arm. "Let him go, he needs a few minutes alone."

"I don't understand? Why's he pissed? And why didn't Josie come back with the rest of us?"

JD looked at the flesh and wax figure of Josie again. Cliff followed his gaze and gasped, realizing the truth of what had happened.

"Listen up everyone," JD raised his voice. He didn't want anyone asking Neil questions later. "Here's what happened..."

By the time he finished, Amy and Jeanne were crying, and even Chantrelle looked on the verge of tears.

JD glanced around room. Danny's leg had bloody cloths wrapped around it. Ricky sat on the floor, staring into space. Traci wasn't much better. Boz had one hand against his ribs and looked out of breath.

And me? An assortment of bruises and cuts, a leg I can barely stand on, and a feeling that because of me, three more people are dead and there might be more before the night is over.

Happy fucking Halloween.

CHAPTER 14

The Proprietor frowned, even as he shivered with ecstasy. The flow of negative energies from the Castle of Horrors, while stronger than ever, was more erratic than he'd anticipated. Although the deaths and emotions generated thus far had been magnificent, the chosen ones were proving exceptionally resourceful.

The Proprietor reached out and randomly selected a soul from one of the hundreds of people frozen inside the supernatural sphere encapsulating the carnival. He absorbed the screaming life force, savoring it, letting it slide through his being.

The annihilation of goodness and life invigorated him, pushing back the tide of unease.

No matter. Another room to go, and then there is always the final chamber.

Yes, let the humans believe in their hope. When it finally fell apart, their pain and anguish would be that much tastier.

He could hardly wait to for their journey to continue.

CHAPTER 15

JD

JD leaned against the wall of the main chamber, keeping as much weight off his bad leg as he could.

Amy took his hand in hers. "What now?"

"Why are you asking me?"

Her eyes widened, and she started to pull away. He held her hand tighter. "Sorry. But it's not like I'm in charge here."

"You are, though."

Jeanne nodded. "Like it or not, you're kind of calling the shots right now."

Shit. That's the last thing I wanted.

He looked around. A few people were talking quietly, but most of them were staring at him.

Waiting for him to say something.

He cleared his throat. "Uh, here's the way I see it. We're alive. We've got two more rooms to go. We know we can't enter the last room until we finish all the others, which means we have no choice about which room we do next."

"And then what?" Chantrelle asked. "Who's gonna die this time? Or maybe you think you can keep us all safe?"

"I'm not promising anything. Will anyone else die tonight? It's possible. I'd be lying if I didn't say that. All we can do is stick together, try to keep each other safe, and use our brains."

"What do you mean, use our brains?" Cliff asked.

"We need to think, not just act. We need to have a plan before we go in, be prepared for whatever's waiting for us."

"I'll go look at the door," Speedy said, standing up.

"No need," Boz told him. "Before we went into the Frankenstein room looking for you guys, we checked."

When Boz didn't say anything further, Neil asked, "So? Break the news already, we're just dying to hear."

"Vampires," JD told them.

"Vampires?" Traci's voice held bitterness and pain. "Oh, that's fuckin' great. We're supposed to become vampire slayers now?"

"Yeah, we're gonna have to kill vampires. So what do we know about them?" JD ticked off the points on his fingers as he spoke. "Sunlight kills them. So does a stake through the heart. The only one hundred percent sure ways to kill a vampire are to cut its head off and destroy both parts, pound a

stake through its heart, or burn it."

Cliff raised his hand. "Vampires drink blood. Traditionally, a vampire has to drain a person almost dry and then give them some of its own blood in order to create a new vampire. Also, most books and movies say vampires have the power to change shapes; they can become wolves or bats, or turn to mist."

"And they don't like crosses, garlic, or silver."

"Right. And they can hypnotize you if you look into their eyes," Dave added.

"So what do we do for weapons?" Boz asked.

A quick survey produced a woefully small list. JD still had his silver dagger from the werewolf chamber, Danny had a machete from the Save-Mart, and Boz had a hunting knife, also from Save-Mart. Amy, Jeanne, and Chantrelle all wore crosses on chains; Amy's was silver. Ricky had his silver money clip pocketknife.

"I've got a mirror." Traci held up a small makeup compact.

"Oh, wow," Chris said. "What are you gonna do, ask a vampire to hold it while you do your makeup?"

She gave him a cold stare. "Even I know you can't see vampires in mirrors." She turned to JD. "Isn't that right?"

"Yeah, that's supposed to be true, they don't cast a reflection. That's something we all forgot," JD told them.

Traci gave Chris a wordless sneer.

JD ignored the rising tension. "We're going to need stakes, too. They have to be made out of wood or they won't work."

"Easier said than done," Danny said. "Not like there's a saw and a stack of wood lying around."

"No, but what about the other rooms?" Jeanne asked. "Some of the stuff in them was made out of wood."

"Yeah, it was," Boz agreed. "I'll go see if I can find something we can use." Picking up the machete, he strode down the walkway and went back into the zombie room.

Everyone sat around, mostly in silence, until Boz returned with an armful of wood.

"I pulled some slats off a backdrop and broke 'em into two-foot sections. I got one for each of us. Gimme a few minutes and I'll sharpen 'em with the machete."

Boz went to work, whittling down one end of each wood slat to a decent point. While he did that, JD reviewed the key points again.

"All right, when we find the vampires, remember: aim for the heart and don't look into their eyes. Any questions?"

"I got a question, Captain Gimp."

Should have known it would be Ricky.

"What do you think it's gonna be like on the other side of that door?"

JD stared at Ricky for a moment. He'd been prepared for sarcasm, not a serious question. Then he looked around at the rest of the group, who were all waiting for his answer.

"I don't know. My guess is nighttime, another castle, and lots of monsters. That seems to be the theme."

"Yeah, I figured as much. Fuck it, let's get it over with." Ricky stood up and grabbed a stake from Boz. Without waiting for anyone, he opened the door and walked inside.

CHAPTER 16

Amy

Amy held on to JD's jacket as he grabbed the door before it could slam shut behind Ricky. "Hurry up, or we might end up separated by the time difference."

Like the previous chambers, the ceiling had been painted to look like a night sky, and dim lighting barely illuminated the room. Amy grabbed JD's hand as the door swung shut, preparing herself for the expected moment of dislocation.

Sure enough, as soon as the latch clicked, everything went fuzzy for a second, and then a brisk, chilly wind blew through her hair. The painted ceiling had morphed into a real sky, scudded with fast-moving clouds that first revealed and then hid the full moon and stars.

A low-lying mist swirled and eddied around Amy's legs, obscuring the ground and rising as high as her knees at some points. A soft breeze shifted and twirled the fog, transforming the trees into images of witches and demons. It was the kind of mist that turned innocent landscapes gothic, where you're surprised if something *doesn't* come out and grab you.

Amy shivered and tried not let her imagination get the best of her.

A steep hill rose ahead of them; further away, the vague outlines of mountains created a jagged horizon. Only the scattered trees and brush broke the monotony of the rocky ground.

"There's a trail," Freddy said. "Guess we're supposed to follow it."

JD nodded and started walking. Amy fell in step next to him. She reached into her shirt and took off her cross, placing it in her coat pocket so she could get to it quickly if she needed it.

The group picked their way carefully up the slick, rocky surface of the winding trail. Rounding yet another turn, Neil pointed ahead of them.

"Look, lights."

Amy peered into the gloom. Tiny points of yellow flickered in the darkness.

JD was right. Another goddamn castle.

"Everybody stay alert," JD said. "That's probably where we'll find the vampires. But it doesn't mean we get can't get attacked out here just as easily."

They walked the last several hundred yards in silence, alert for any movement in the gloom.

As they approached the wide doors, Boz stopped them. "Does anything about this place look familiar?" he asked.

"Yeah, I noticed that, too," JD replied. "It looks a lot like the castle where we fought the werewolves."

"It also looks like Frankenstein's castle," Speedy told them.

"That's not all," Boz continued. "It reminds me of the Castle of Horrors, or at least the way it was painted to look like."

"Freaky," Dave muttered.

"And it might be important. Why castles?" JD mused, staring up at the stone edifice.

"Who cares? Are we gonna stand out here like a bunch of fags, or are we going inside?" Ricky asked.

JD raised an eyebrow at Ricky's sudden burst of confidence. Amy thought he might take exception to Ricky's words, but instead he just said, "Go inside, I guess."

As she followed him into the castle, Amy found herself praying again.

Dear God, please keep your hand on us and guide us to safety.

CHAPTER 17

Ricky

As they entered the castle, Ricky's guts quivered and he clenched his ass cheeks together, afraid he might accidentally squirt into his underwear. The last thing he wanted to do was enter a dark, creepy castle full of vampires, but he couldn't let a limping jerk like JD Cole show him up.

Unlike Frankenstein's gloomy, run-down castle, the great room they entered had dozens of torches burning in sconces along the walls. Works of art and fine tapestries hung everywhere, and the place looked freshly cleaned.

An enormous fireplace built into one wall crackled merrily, giving off a welcome glow after the chill air outside. Brilliantly-colored, hand-woven carpets covered large sections of the polished stone floor.

"Wow, this place looks like it's the home of some sixteenth-century king," Amy said.

"Actually, I'm a seventeenth-century prince."

Ricky let out a tiny yelp as the owner of the heavily-accented voice entered the room.

The tall, middle-aged gentleman wore black tuxedo pants, a white, sharply starched shirt with a black knitted tie, and a red smoking jacket. He exuded power and nobility, from his ebony, slicked down hair and tall, muscular physique to his black diamond eyes and short goatee.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Count Nicolae Inczady, Voivode of this keep and surrounding lands. Welcome, my friends. What brings you to my home on such a cold, damp night?"

The Count's voice, like his dress and manner, oozed culture and wealth. His thick accent reminded Ricky of family vacations in Switzerland and Germany.

JD cleared his throat and stepped forward. "My friends and I are lost. We saw the lights of your castle and thought to find help, perhaps even shelter for the night."

"Ah, travelers from a foreign land," Count Inczady's words rolled off his tongue as if he savored the taste of each one before releasing it. "There seems to be a lot of that tonight. You are not the first strangers to make their way to my doorstep on this fine evening."

"You've had other visitors?" JD asked. "Are they still here?"

"But of course. I would never turn away a stranger in need. They entered my home of their own free will, as have you. I would be remiss in my duties as a host if I did not invite them to participate in our evening meal."

"Our?" This from Amy.

"Yes, my lovely lady. I have several guests staying with me, and we were just sitting down to dine when you arrived. Please, join us." The Count bowed and waved his arm forward.

Boz glanced at JD, who nodded. Everyone fell in line behind them. Ricky watched their interaction. *Unbelievable. Next thing you know he'll be asking Cole for permission to take a shit.*

The Count led them down a short, stone-walled passage that opened into an enormous formal dining area. Ricky estimated the room was at least a hundred feet long and almost half as wide.

Flaming torches ringed the walls, and candles burned on three large sideboards. The flickering light of the different flames made the shadows and objects in the room jitter and twitch, lending a mild strobe effect to the already eerie atmosphere.

Opposite the sideboards were several enormous windows, each made up of a multitude of small panes. Heavy black curtains framed the windows, which presented a magnificent view of the wild landscape outside.

An oversized, rectangular banquet table, made of heavy, dark wood, dominated the center of the room. Large enough to hold a family reunion, it seemed empty with only eight people seated at it. Each of the thirty ornately decorated chairs had intricately carved arms and luxurious red satin coverings.

None of it mattered.

At the far end of the table sat the most beautiful woman Ricky had ever seen.

My god, she could make millions in America as a super model or actress.

Shoulder-length, dark-as-midnight hair, the pale complexion so popular among health-conscious women, and heavy, crimson lips full of seductive promises grabbed his attention and held it in an iron grip. Her low-cut gown, its color a perfect match to her hair, emphasized her large, perfectly-shaped breasts.

Ricky felt himself growing hard. *I wonder what she'd look like naked?*

As if she could hear his thoughts, the woman turned her head and stared at Ricky with onyx eyes. She smiled, a slow, sensuous action that raised gooseflesh on his arms. When she ran the tip of her tongue across her lips, the strength left his legs and he had to steady himself against the back of a chair.

A whispered voice intruded on his reverie.

"Traci. *Traci.* Your mirror. Quick, use it now."

Ricky felt himself returning to the here and now as JD nudged Traci's elbow. An annoyed look on her face, Traci pulled out the small mirror and aimed it towards the people seated at the table.

"I can see all of them. That means they're not vampires, right?" she whispered back.

JD nodded, but had a worried look on his face.

Now what's his beef? We got the all clear. Ricky returned his attention to the table, where the Count had sat down across from the angel in black. The rest of Inczady's dinner party consisted of an equal number of men and women, each stunningly good-looking in their own right. The guests' ages seemed to range from early twenties to mid-forties, and all were dressed in gowns and or tailored suits.

"Please, be seated," the Count said. "My friends and I were about to begin the first course."

Inczady clapped his hands and two servants came in, bearing silver-covered platters.

Ricky looked down and found his legs carrying him towards the table. Next to him, Danny and Cliff were also helping themselves to empty seats.

"Where are the other visitors you mentioned?" JD asked.

"Ah, do not worry. You will meet them momentarily."

The Count smiled, his teeth large and white behind thick lips. A warning bell rang somewhere at the back of Ricky's thoughts, but remained too distant to make an impression. The servants placed the trays on the table and removed the lids, exposing the contents.

Ten large hearts, five to a platter, lay fresh and bloody on the gleaming silver.

"Ah, here are your fellow travelers now," Inczady said with a deep chuckle.

Inczady's guests lunged at the dripping organs, shoving at each other in their haste to get the raw meat. Digging fingers deep into the thick red muscle, they brought their grotesque food to their mouths and commenced sucking and chewing on the flesh. Moans of pleasure filled the air as the diners squeezed the hearts, wringing every drop of blood and fluid from the tissue.

Someone screamed, and a vaguely familiar voice shouted a warning, but the words held no power for Ricky. All that mattered was the mysterious woman seated down the table from him.

Far, far away, a girl's voice cried out "But I saw you in the mirror."

Deep, masculine tones responded. "You must learn not to place all your trust in superstitions, Miss Trachsel."

Ricky.

The voice spoke inside his head. He glanced again at the woman down the table, found her smiling at him.

Ricky. Look at me.

Her eyes began to change. Pinpoints of crimson appeared in their dark depths. The vermilion circles grew, consuming the inky darkness until only red remained.

Suddenly the spell broke, returning Ricky's mind to him.

Awareness brought with it a vision from Hell. The beautiful young

woman was gone; in her place sat a nightmare crone. The thing's eyes glowed like pits of fire, and its lips drew back to reveal a mouth full of sharp, pointed teeth.

Withered, leathery skin wrapped tightly around bones; its arms and legs were long and spindly like an insect's. The fingers, now twice their previous length, terminated in black, dangerous-looking claws.

Around the table, all of the 'guests' were undergoing similar transformations, including the Count himself.

One of the vampires launched itself into the air.

"Oh, shit!" Ricky pushed away from the table, falling backwards as his chair tumbled over.

The vampire sailed over him as he landed ass-first on the hard stone. A clawed hand reached down in a futile effort to snag its intended prey, the talons shredding one sleeve of his football jacket as they passed by. The fetid stench of its breath lingered in its wake.

"Everyone get back." JD's voice rang out over the general din as all the monsters sprang from their chairs and charged the humans.

From a vantage point under the table, Ricky watched one of the vampires crawling sideways on the wall, scuttling along as fast as a man could run.

"Don't kill them," Inczady commanded. "We need them for the larder."

Ricky wasn't sure what that meant but he didn't like the sound of it. He saw JD swinging his stake back and forth, keeping a vampire at bay. Boz grappled with another. A lucky thrust of his stake got past the vampire's arm and penetrated the heart. The shrieking creature dissolved into a sticky pile of black goo. Before Boz could turn around, a vampire struck him from behind, knocking his stake away and pinning him to the floor.

Three creatures had Amy, Jeanne, and Traci backed into a corner. Cliff, Chris, and Dave lay unconscious on the ground. Danny swung wildly with a machete at anything that came near. A vampire made a grab for him, and the blade connected, severing the clawed, scaly arm just below the elbow.

With a howl that made Ricky curl up into a ball, the injured vampire clamped its jaws on Danny's neck and tore his throat out.

A wide spray of blood spurted from the gaping hole, and the vampire gulped down mouthfuls of the crimson fluid, unmindful of the liquid splattering its face and chest. The blood attracted two other vampires and they joined in, tearing and shredding the body until they reduced it to a pile of meat.

"Enough!" Inczady's scream froze the vampires in place. "I said they were not to be killed."

"But Master..." the one-armed vamp started to say.

"Do not disobey me again." Count Inczady pointed at the injured vampire. "Get them to their cells alive and breathing or I will stake you out to

burn in the morning sun. And as for you," he continued in a quieter, but no less angry tone, pointing at JD, "I suggest you and your companions acquiesce, or your lady friends are going to start losing body parts, slowly and painfully."

The Count nodded towards the vampires guarding the three girls. One of them reached forward and raked a claw across Jeanne's stomach, tearing through her coat and shirt to leave three bloody scratches across her skin. Jeanne screamed and fell to the ground.

"All right." JD tossed his stake to the floor. "Everyone, drop your weapons."

The dull thud of wood on stone sounded as the others gave up their stakes as well. Ricky let out a short yip of terror as two clawed hands grasped him by his jacket and dragged him out from under the table.

"Way to help in a fight," Boz said with a sneer, as a vampire led him away.

"Screw you, farm boy. We had no chance. At least I'm not a fuckin' pile of hamburger on the floor."

The remaining vampires assumed their human countenances and herded the humans down a long, stone staircase and into a dank subterranean chamber.

"Welcome to your new home, my friends," the Count told them. "I hope you will be happy with the accommodations, however briefly you'll be enjoying them." He gestured to his companions. "Lock them away until we need them." Then with a wet, gurgling laugh, the Count disappeared up the stairs.

Ricky found himself shoved into a cell with JD, Fred, and the unconscious Dave. The loud clang of the door locking behind them reminded him too much of the cage they'd only recently escaped.

Despair washed over him, so heavy it was a physical weight on his back. He sank down onto the cold, damp floor, unmindful of the rotten-smelling slime growing on the cold stone.

Locked in a cage again.

And this time no one to rescue us.

CHAPTER 18

JD

As far as JD could tell, all the vampires had gone back upstairs. In the tomb-like quiet of the dungeon, the only sounds were the rustle of unseen rats and the occasional *drip-drip* of condensation falling onto stone.

"Oh, God, what are we gonna do now?" Chantrelle said from the next cell.

"The first thing is to make sure everyone's all right." JD raised his voice. "I'm in here with Dave, Fred, and Ricky. We're okay, although Dave is unconscious."

Amy spoke from the next cell, eliminating JD's number one worry. "JD, it's me. We're right next to you. Jeanne, Boz, Chantrelle, and Traci are with me. We're all okay, too, just some scrapes and scratches."

"No one got bit?"

"No."

"Thank God. Cliff, where are you?"

"Down past the girls' cage. Neil, Chris, and Speedy are with me. We're all right, just banged up a little."

"So we're in pretty good shape, considering," JD said.

"Pretty good shape? How can you say that? Danny's dead, man," Neil shouted "They tore him to shreds and ate him alive."

JD understood the grief behind Neil's anger all too well.

"We're still alive. That's what we have to focus on, that and getting the hell out of here. They could have killed all of us, but they didn't, which means we might have a chance of escaping."

"Escaping?" Ricky lifted his head from his chest. He sounded close to tears. "How the hell you gonna get us out of here? What are you, the David Blain of New York? Gonna wave your magic wand and make the vampires disappear?"

"Bite me," JD said "We've got weapons. That means we have a chance."

"Weapons? What weapons?" Boz asked. "We lost the hunting knife and the machete in the fight."

"I've still got my silver knife, and the girls have their crosses. We need to make sure the vampires don't find out about any of that until we have the chance to use them."

"Why didn't you use the knife before?" Ricky asked. "Too much of a chicken, gimp-boy?"

"I wouldn't be talking about chickens if I were you, Ricky," came Boz's voice. "At least he wasn't hiding under the table. Even the girls put up more

of a fight than you."

"Screw you, too. What, I should get myself killed for nothing? Maybe that makes sense to a block head like you, but I want to live, thank you."

"Arguing isn't gonna help us," JD said, hoping to head things off before they went further. "Look around your cells, check for weak bars, loose stones, anything."

Murmured agreements and the sound of people moving around their cells took the place of raised voices.

Until Chantrelle screamed. "*Mierde!*"

"Cali! You okay?"

"No. I mean, yes, Hector, I'm all right, but there's, like, dead bodies in here."

"What? What happened?" JD asked. Visions of corpses rising up filled his head.

Amy started describing what they'd found. "She's right, there are dead bodies in the back of our cell. Six or seven of them, they're all bloody. Something tore their chests open."

"Probably other people from the carnival who got here before us, the ones whose hearts got served for dinner," Freddy said.

Before anyone else could say anything, the sound of footsteps on stone echoed down from the staircase. JD moved to the cell door for a better view. When two female vampires, still dressed in their evening gowns, approached the cell, he backed away.

"Mmm, they look delicious," one of them said. Tall and blonde, she had the body of a swimsuit model and a face to match. Only her eyes, twin red windows into Hell, gave away her true nature. Her tongue rolled out of her mouth and lazily licked her lips as she examined each of the occupants of the cell.

Like we're pieces of meat, JD thought with a shudder.

The second vamp was shorter but no less beautiful. When she smiled, oversized fangs showed between her lips. Her mocha complexion, tight ringlets of hair falling down to her shoulders, and almond-shaped eyes gave her an exotic appearance. To JD, she looked like she should be standing on a beach in Aruba or Jamaica, not slinking around in a dark, gloomy castle.

"I think we should let one of them out to play," Almond Eyes said.

The taller vamp laughed and nodded in agreement, her short hair bobbing. She drew out a key and unlocked the ancient door. JD stepped even further back, trying to put as much distance as possible between him and the two vampires. Next to him, Freddy and Ricky did the same. Dave still lay unconscious on the floor.

"So, who wants to come play with us?" the blonde asked in a low, sultry voice. She stared at each of them for a moment, and then locked eyes with

Freddy. Crooking her finger at him, she said, "You look big and strong. Come, feel our pleasures."

Freddy started to shake his head, then froze. As if straining against an invisible force, the muscles and ligaments of his neck tightened and bulged. His fists clenched, knuckles turning white. Slowly he moved forward towards the two vampires, feet shuffling across the stone and straw. JD stepped in front of Freddy and tried to hold him back.

Strong hands grabbed him and he found himself flying through the air before crashing onto the stone floor.

"Next time I will tear your head from your shoulders, human," the darker vampire growled. "Do not interfere, unless you want to experience a great deal of pain. The master has said we cannot kill you. Nothing else has been forbidden to us."

Through blurred vision, JD saw that the two vampires had relinquished their human guises, their grotesque, gargoyle-like faces and elongated limbs more rooted in science fiction than reality. Ricky cried out and covered his face.

Voices called out from the other cells. One of them seemed to be Amy's but JD couldn't be sure. The ringing in his head overwhelmed all other sounds.

JD lay on the cold, slick floor, unable to move or answer, helpless as the two crones grabbed Freddy and drew him outside of the cage. One of them kicked closed the cell door. The dusky vamp commanded Freddy to lie down on his back. She lifted her gown, exposing scale-covered legs.

The blonde opened Freddy's shirt and stroked his chest. Although his eyes were closed, he smiled and began moaning, tossing his head from side to side.

"Ah, our touch brings him such pleasure." The dark vampire rubbed her body against Freddy, running her fingernails across his belly and down his legs.

The blonde nuzzled her mouth against his neck. Unlike the bestial rage the vampires had shown earlier, she bit down just hard enough to open a shallow wound in his neck,. She sucked at the cut in an evil parody of a baby at a breast.

After several minutes, the two vampires traded places, the blonde kissing her way across Freddy's chest and stomach while the brunette lapped at his neck wound with a black, scaly tongue.

Freddy moaned as the vampire's hand moved lower, opening his pants and freeing his erect penis so she could lower herself onto it.

"Ahhh! Now for the best part," the blonde laughed. She stared into Freddy's eyes. "Look at me, human. See the monster who has made you feel such pleasure."

Released from her spell, Freddy's gaze cleared, and his eyes opened wide in fear. He opened his mouth but no sound emerged.

"That's right, you can see and feel, but I still control you."

His blood dripped from her razor-sharp teeth onto his chest as she ground herself onto him. Freddy struggled against her, but could only shake his body back and forth, which only made the vampire moan louder.

"Yes, little rabbit, struggle. Your fear delights me almost as much as your cock."

The blonde bit hard into Freddy's chest, just above one nipple, drawing a gasp pain from her victim.

"Yessss!" she cried, spraying droplets of blood across his skin.

"My turn now," the brunette said, but the blonde shook her head as she stood up, revealing Freddy's already-shriveled penis.

"I don't think our friend wants to play anymore," she said, blood still running down her chin.

"Very well."

The brunette opened the cell door and the blonde dragged Freddy's semi-conscious form inside. After locking the door again, the darker vamp peered in at the captives.

"Food and sex. That is all you humans are good for. But if you behave, it might be enough to keep you alive." She flicked out her long, forked tongue and then laughed low in her throat. Arm in arm, the two vampires left the dungeon.

On the floor, Freddy moaned and tried to bring his hand up to his neck.

JD pulled himself to his feet, using the wall for support. "C'mon, Ricky, help me get him dressed."

Ricky started to back away, but JD grabbed him and pulled him over. Together they propped Freddy up, buttoned his shirt, zipped up the pants. JD used the bottom of his shirt to wipe away the blood from Freddy's neck. Once cleaned, the wound didn't look bad. It wouldn't even need stitches.

After he'd done as much as he could to make Freddy comfortable, JD sat down next to him, resting a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"It's all right, bro, the bites aren't bad."

Freddy remained silent.

Ricky moved to the other side of the cell and spoke briefly with Dave and Boz, filling them in on what had happened. Then he came back and stood next to JD.

"Do you think he lost much blood?"

JD stood up, looked at Freddy a moment longer, and then led Ricky to the back of the cell. "Not too much. It looks messy, but he probably lost less than if he'd donated blood. I'm more worried about something one those vamps said."

"What's that?"

"The master isn't going to mind if we're injured, as long as we're still alive."

"So? Alive is good, right?"

"Maybe. It means the master not only has something planned for us, but that we can expect more visits like that one."

Ricky shrugged. "It ain't the worst torture I can imagine. A bite on the neck and some bad memories is better than being torn to pieces."

"Yeah? Why don't you ask Freddy about that. Who knows what those leeches were doing inside his head?" JD moved over by the cell door. *He manages to be an asshole even when he's not trying.*

"Hey, Ames, you holding up all right?"

"We're okay," came her reply.

Just the sound of her voice made him feel better, pushed the empty feeling of despair back a little bit.

"Traci thinks she recognizes one of the bodies in here from school, an assistant coach or something. And Chris said there're more bodies in their cell, too." She paused, and then asked the question he'd been dreading. "JD, what are we going to do?"

"I don't know, love. I just don't know. We need to be ready to take advantage of any opportunity, all of us. Maybe the next time one of them comes for us, everyone in the cell can make a rush for the door and someone can slip past. We just need to stay focused, and not give up hope."

"I wish I could see you," Amy said. She spoke softly but he could hear the tears in her voice.

A picture of her formed in his mind, chestnut hair messed and tangled, oval face smudged with dirt and bruises, golden eyes sunken with fear and exhaustion. Not only was she beautiful, but a lot tougher than she gave herself credit for.

"I wish I could see you, too. Hang in there. We'll get out of this. We've gotten this far, a bunch of vampires isn't going to beat us."

"Brave words, JD, but don't try to make us believe you can back them up," came Traci's voice. "You don't know what's going to happen next any more than we do. If those vamps decided to kill us all right now, what would you do, huh? Got some secret plan you haven't shared with us yet?"

JD didn't answer, *couldn't* answer, because he knew she was right.

No, I can't give up hope. Everything tonight has been like the stories we've grown up with. And in all the movies I've seen or books I've read about vampires, the good guys usually win, because vampires have weaknesses.

He went over the list again. Sunlight, silver, garlic, crosses. More importantly, greed and egotism were two character flaws all vampires seemed to share. They believed themselves better than humans, and consequently had

a tendency to underestimate them.

Well, I hope we get the chance to use that against them. We're not going to do it with brute strength, that's for sure.

Just then, footsteps sounded again on the stairs. A moment later, two male vampires entered the dungeon. They walked past JD's cell and stared into the next one, eager smiles on their faces.

No, not the women.

Not Amy.

CHAPTER 19

JD

JD gripped the bars of the cage as the two vampires continued to stare at the girls. Classically dressed and handsome in a menacing way, both had long black hair that hung over the collars of their dinner jackets. The taller of the two stood well over six-five and sported a drooping handlebar moustache, while the other, only slightly shorter, had a clean-shave face and a touch of gray at the temples.

The taller one pointed into the girls' cell. "You. We have need of your flesh," he said, no emotion in his deep, heavily accented voice.

"Leave them alone, take me instead," JD shouted. His mind recoiled from the thought of the two undead creatures violating Amy.

The clean-shaven vampire barely glanced at him. "Silence! Your time will come."

The tall vampire opened the cell and went inside, leaving JD's line of sight. One of the girls screamed, then came the unmistakable sound of flesh hitting flesh, followed by an even louder thump as a body hit stone.

"What's going on? What are you doing?" JD yelled.

Traci screamed in response—*"No! No!"*—and Amy and Chantrelle shouted for the vampire to *"let go."*

JD banged his hands against the bars, but the shorter vampire didn't even look at him. Instead, it walked further down the passage, to the third cell. Now JD couldn't see either vamp, but he heard the third cell being opened, and then more shouts.

A few seconds later, the cell doors banged shut and the two vampires came back into view, along with their chosen victims.

The tall vampire had a firm grip on Traci, who struggled furiously, kicking and punching, although for all the effect it had on the vampire she might has well have been motionless. The second vampire guided a hypnotized Cliff down the corridor.

"Traci!" Ricky shouted, running to the front of the cage. "If you hurt her I'll kill you." Ricky stuck his arm through the bars, but the two monsters ignore him.

"Ricky! Help! Don't let them do this!" Traci stretched her free arm out, desperately trying to reach back towards her boyfriend. The two vampires went up the stairs, Traci's shouts echoing back to them, growing fainter and fainter until they faded away completely.

"Amy! Are you all right?" JD called to the next cell.

"Boz tried to tackle the vampire, but it tossed him across the cell like he

weighed nothing."

"Is he hurt?"

In a shaky voice, Boz answered for himself. "No, I just had the wind knocked out of me. Those things are a lot stronger than they look."

"So much for jumping one when they come into the cell," Ricky muttered. "Any other bright ideas, hop-a-long?"

JD whirled on Ricky. "No, no more bright ideas," he shouted, getting right in the quarterback's face. "How 'bout you? Any ideas? Anything at all? C'mon, you're so quick to tell me my ideas suck. How would you get us out of here?"

Ricky, his eyes wide, took a step back and bumped into the stone wall behind him. JD didn't wait for him to reply. Putting his face between the bars, he said in a loud voice, "How about anyone else? Anyone got an idea, speak up. How about you, Neil? You're supposed to be so smart. Tell us your plan."

"JD, calm down," Amy said.

"No, I won't calm down. Everyone else is just sitting around, waiting for me to come up with the answers. I didn't ask to be in charge. What, you people think I've been in a castle full of vampires before? Or a haunted carnival? I'm ready to listen if someone's got a better idea."

"Hey, man, take it easy," Boz called out. "This is hard on all of us. Only reason we keep asking you what to do is, well, you're the only one who's keeping it together so far. I got your back as far as muscle goes, but I'm not good at making plans."

"Just because we listen to you doesn't mean you're responsible for us. We're all in this together," Amy said.

"But I am responsible. You wouldn't be here if it wasn't for me. Paulette and the others would still be alive. All I wanted was to go to the damn carnival with my girlfriend, and now we're stuck in a moldy freakin' dungeon waiting to be eaten."

"It's not your fault." Amy's voice was loud but calm. "You didn't force us to come here. And you sure didn't make Ricky, or MC, or Traci, or anyone else go to the carnival. So drop the guilt trip and use your brain to help us escape."

"It's not a guilt trip." His voice sounded sullen even to his own ears.

"You know," came Neil's voice, "I never did thank you for saving our lives back at Frankenstein's castle. I was too upset over everything that had happened, but the truth is, if you hadn't come along with Boz and the others, we'd all be dead right now."

"Yeah, you okay in my book," Chantrelle said.

"It's true, man, you did right by us," Speedy added.

JD took a deep breath, let it out slowly. *Amy's right, I can't be responsible for everyone.*

"The reason we're still alive is 'cause we've helped each other. And that's what we have to keep doing."

"It's cool, man, we're with you," Speedy said. The others expressed their encouragement as well.

One voice was conspicuously absent; Ricky stood in a back corner of the cell, a petulant look on his all-American face.

Well, let him sulk. He hasn't been much use anyway.

JD leaned his back against the bars and let his body slide to the floor. The dungeon grew quiet.

After what seemed like fifteen minutes or so, the two male vampires returned, herding Cliff and Traci along like two zombies. Traci's jacket was missing and her pants undone. Her torn blouse revealed scratched and bruised flesh. Several bloodstains spotted her shirt and pants. Cliff's clothes were rumpled, and he had a large bite mark on his neck similar to Freddy's.

The vampires returned the two humans to their cages and left again. As soon as he could no longer hear their footsteps, JD called over to Amy and asked her about Traci's condition.

"She's hurt," Amy sounded concerned, and that worried him. "That thing raped her."

Before JD could respond, Chris spoke up from his cell. "It's not just Traci. They did stuff to Cliff, too. Damn vampire was a fuckin' homo."

"Try to make them as comfortable as possible. Keep them warm. There's nothing else we can do right now."

Amy said something affirmative, which she probably hoped would cheer him up, but Neil's sarcastic snort hit a lot closer to home.

He knows we're screwed. They probably all do.

And then he thought about Amy, taking care of a girl who was her worst enemy, and acting like she believed JD would get them out of this. He couldn't let her down. He had to figure something out.

The too-familiar sound of hard leather on stone drew his attention. This time there were three males, and they wasted no time going right for the center cell.

Eyes glowing, bodies already beginning to change, they charged in and emerged with a struggling Chantrelle in their grasp.

Speedy screamed as the vampires dragged Chantrelle away. "Cali! Fight 'em. You can do it, girl. Be strong."

Chantrelle didn't need any instruction. She kicked, punched, and clawed anything she could reach, all while cursing her attackers in Spanish and English.

"*Maricons! Me cago en la resigna de tu madre!* Fuck your mothers! Suck my *mamey, pendejos.*"

As strong as the three vampires were, they couldn't keep a firm grasp on

the whirling dervish of nails, feet, and teeth that was Chantrelle Ojeda. One fell back, deep furrows gouged across his face and through his short-cropped beard, his mustachioed lip torn and hanging where her long, brightly manicured nails had sliced through it. Another, the shortest of the three, doubled over from a kick to the groin.

Finally, the tallest one got behind her and yanked her arms back so hard she yelped in pain. The one with the bloody face grabbed her legs and lifted them off the ground, allowing the third to come forward at its leisure, a wide smile forming on its almost reptilian visage.

"Stay still," he commanded.

"Fuck you!"

The vampire flicked a hand out, slapped her across the face. The loud crack of leathery flesh on human skin silenced the cheers and shouts coming from the cells. Chantrelle's head snapped back and her eyes glazed over as she went limp.

Unlike the others, these vampires didn't bother taking their victim to a private location. They propped Chantrelle's semi-conscious body upright against the stone wall, in full view of all the prisoners, and tore apart her jacket and blouse. The vamp with the clawed face, his injuries already healed, reached out and stripped off her bra.

Speedy went crazy, pounding his hands on the bars and hurling curses in Spanish and English, while the demonic rapists emitted raspy noises that JD took for laughter. One of them flicked a maroon-colored snake's tongue across Chantrelle's chest and belly, leaving behind a thick, dripping snail path of slime.

The hairy-faced vampire shoved its face between Chantrelle's breasts as the other two howled with inhuman glee. A second later, it jumped back with a shriek, its grotesque face smoking, the perfect imprint of a cross burned into one cheek.

"A holy icon! The human wears a holy icon."

With an angry growl, the monster holding her hair shoved her forward into the rock wall of the passage. Barely awake, she didn't even put an arm up to protect herself.

Her forehead hit the stone with a sound like a coconut cracking open. She slid to the ground, a trail of blood smearing the wall. The short vampire grabbed her chain and snapped it off, flinging the cross far down the dark passage. Then all three vampires pounced on her.

The vampire with the burned face thrust its head down, tearing into Chantrelle's flesh just above one shoulder blade. The tall one dug its claws into her leg, sending up a stream of blood from a severed artery.

"Stop! You're killing her. *No mas, no mas.*" Speedy screamed, kicking and banging at the bars.

To JD, it looked like they had gone into some kind of feeding frenzy. Like sharks attacking a seal, they had no awareness of anything except their meal.

The vampire that had bitten her shoulder lifted its head, a fist-sized chunk of flesh between its teeth. Blood sprayed up, inciting the other two even further. They tore at Chantrelle's body with their teeth and claws. One vampire continued to gnaw at her neck and shoulder, while the third started chewing vigorously at one wrist.

JD screamed at Neil and Chris to get Speedy away from the bars so he wouldn't see what was happening, but he couldn't tell if they'd heard him, or if they'd done anything.

Chantrelle's body gave a convulsive shudder and went still. The vampire with its head buried in her chest pulled back, her beating heart in its jaws. With a huge gulp, it swallowed the organ in one piece, its neck expanding in snakelike fashion.

Once the life left Chantrelle's body, the vampires' bestial rage faded away as quickly as it had come on, and they re-assumed their human forms. Dripping with blood, they stared at Chantrelle's corpse as if they had no idea where it had come from.

"You fucking bastards!" Speedy's voice cracked with the force of his cries. "You killed her. You killed my Cali. You weren't supposed to kill anyone." His next words were incomprehensible through his sobs.

JD choked back his own tears. "The Master won't be very pleased."

The vampires looked at each other, their eyes widening with fear. The tall one motioned to the others, who carried Chantrelle's body down the passageway, leaving a trail of blood behind them.

"Make sure no trace of her is found," said the vampire who remained behind. "Stay with the dogs until they have finished."

JD closed his eyes. His hands clenched the iron bars until his knuckles screamed *no more.* He prayed Speedy hadn't heard the vampire's last comment.

He wanted to tear down the bars and smash the vampire's head against the moldy stones until it cracked open, spilling brains and fluid everywhere. His body tensed. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Losing his temper wouldn't help.

After a count of twenty, he opened his eyes and found himself facing his worst fear. The tall, long-haired vampire stood in front of Amy's cage, a lascivious look on its face.

"Your friend made a mistake wearing a holy item into our midst," the vampire said, staring into the girls' cage but addressing all the prisoners. "The Master will understand. However, my thirst for flesh has not been slaked."

The vampire opened the cage again and stepped inside.

"Please, don't." JD's words came out as a hoarse gasp from his suddenly

dry throat. A horrible certainty took root in the pit of his stomach. This time it would be Amy. If anything happened to her, that would be it, he'd just give up. Let them kill him. It wouldn't matter anymore.

"Get your hands off me!" Amy's voice, confirming his fears.

"Yes! Struggle, fight. Your fear and anger makes the blood so much sweeter," the vampire growled, as it dragged Amy from her cell.

The undead monster grasped Amy's neck with one large hand and pushed her against the wall. With the other, it tore open her coat and ripped the front of her shirt off, exposing her bra. It raked its claws down, tearing her pants from her legs, revealing her body for all to see.

Amy gasped in pain as the vampire bit into the soft skin over her collar bone. Sucking noises filled the air.

JD wanted to turn away, but he kept his eyes on hers. He didn't want her last sight of him to be his head turning away from her. "Amy, I love you, I'm here."

Cheap words that wouldn't save her, but maybe they'd make her death less horrifying.

He was so focused on what was happening he never saw Amy's hand move to her coat pocket. Neither did the vampire, because it was as surprised as JD when Amy opened her eyes and said, "Hey, asshole, I've got a present for you."

The vampire lifted its head and looked directly at her, red drool hanging from its lips. Amy swung her arm up and forward, driving her silver cross into the creature's eye. The red orb exploded, sending fluids and shreds of flesh across Amy's face and the wall next to her.

The vampire stumbled back, screaming and clawing at its eye. Fire and smoke spouted from wound. Amy ran over to JD's cell. "Hurry, JD, give me your knife."

Numb, he passed it to her, automatically presenting it handle first. She rushed back to the vampire, who still howled in pain as it stumbled back and forth. With a quick motion, she stabbed the short blade into its chest. The vampire's scream turned into a choking cry and its hands dropped to the new wound, leaving its neck exposed. Amy swung the knife again, this time slicing open the creature's throat.

A mammoth gout of loathsome, vile-smelling ichor gushed out, spilling down the undead creature's chest in a dark red wave. A second stream of the odious fluid erupted outwards. Amy backed away from the fountain of corruption, knife still held loosely in her hand, as the vampire fell to the floor.

Now JD felt himself coming awake, as if rising from a deep dream. "Amy! The keys. Get the keys."

Moving so slowly JD feared the vampire would regenerate before she finished, Amy felt through the creature's tuxedo jacket pockets until she

pulled out the iron ring. She didn't even try to open the door, just handed the keys and the knife to JD and then backed across the hallway again.

JD reached between the bars, unlocked the door, and charged out of the cell.

"This ends now." JD clutched the vampire's long, black hair and pulled the head back. He brought the knife across the monster's throat, re-opening the already-healing wound Amy had made.

As another rush of blood poured out, he sawed at the tough flesh, deeper and deeper, until he reached the spinal cord. Shoving his whole hand into the steaming-hot opening, he hacked at the bone and gristle until the spine severed and the head fell to the floor. A second later, the vampire's body melted into a pile of foul-smelling mush.

While Ricky took the keys and unlocked the other two cells, JD stepped over the putrid remains of the vampire to grab Amy and pull her into a tight embrace.

"I thought I'd lost you," he whispered into her ear. "I couldn't live without you."

He buried his face in her neck and breathed deep as he snuffled back tears, smelling blood, sweat, dirt, and, underneath it all, her wonderful scent.

"I love you too." Amy gripped him so tightly her nails sank into his skin, and she sobbed against his chest. "I couldn't live without you, either. That's why I made sure he picked me."

"What? You almost got yourself killed because you thought I wanted you to be a hero? Amy, I never meant for you to risk your life like that." He held her face in his hands and bent down to kiss her, not caring about the blood smeared all over her face.

"That's bullshit!" Amy pushed him away. "It's okay for you to do it, but not me? Every one of us has to be ready to do something like this if we want to get out of here alive. You said so yourself. And that means me, too, even though I'm your girlfriend."

JD didn't know whether to yell at her or apologize. Instead, he wrapped his arms around her. This time she didn't resist. "You're right, Ames. But I love you, and that makes me want to keep you out of danger."

"I know. I'm not mad at you. I just want you to understand where I'm coming from." Amy shivered in his arms.

"You're freezing. Take this." He helped Amy out of her ruined coat and into his fleece-lined denim jacket. Then, turning his back to everyone, he stripped out of his pants and boxers, and handed the underwear to Amy to replace her shredded jeans. As he was pulling his pants back on, Jeanne retrieved Amy's cross from the remains of the vampire and cleaned it off.

"Here," she said, handing it back.

Amy nodded her thanks.

Boz gave Ricky an elbow and pointed towards Traci, who sat against the wall, her head down. Ricky nodded and gave her his football jacket.

"Thank you," she said in a small voice.

Ricky didn't say anything, just moved next to her. He hesitated a moment, then put his arm around her, like a kid on a first date at the movie theater.

JD glanced at the people gathered in the passageway. Except for Traci all of them seemed reasonably alert, although he wasn't so sure about Freddy. His friend was standing and walking on his own, but his eyes were still distant, and he refused to speak.

"We need to find a place to hide before another bloodsucker decides it's time for a snack, or comes looking for that one." He pointed his foot at the soggy mass of putrefied flesh.

"In Medieval History we studied a lot of famous castles," Jeanne said. "They usually had rooms in the basement for waste disposal, storage, even stables for horses. That's also where the servants entered and exited the castle."

"We're already in the basement," JD said, "so let's try to find an exit, and then someplace to hide outside of the castle. We'll wait until daylight and sneak back in. That'll be our best chance to kill them, when the sun is out and hopefully they're weaker, maybe even asleep."

"You want to come back and fight those things? Are you nuts?" Ricky helped a near-somnambulent Traci to her feet.

"We have to. Otherwise we'll be stuck here forever."

Ricky shook his head. "Either way, we die. Lead on."

The passage led them to an old sluice tunnel that Neil said was probably a sewer at one time. They stayed with the sluice to where it passed through the castle wall and dumped into a small stream, which they followed into a scrub forest. From there, a short walk brought them to a clearing.

"Let's stop here," JD said. "I don't want us to get lost in the woods."

"Do you think it's safe to drink the water?" Amy asked. "Things are bad enough now. I'd hate to get the runs on top of everything else."

Before JD could answer, a voice came from the other side of the stream.

"Bad water be the least of your worries. If I were you, I'd be thinking how to stay alive until daylight."

CHAPTER 20

Amy

Amy's heart jumped into overdrive as the figure emerged from the undergrowth into the dim light of the moon. Medium in height and build, his clothes were little more than rags. He carried an oversized leather satchel in one hand and a large wooden cross in the other.

"Come forward, show me that the power of Christ does you no harm," the stranger said.

"We're not vampires, if that's what you're afraid of." Jeanne held out her own cross. Amy withdrew hers from around her neck and showed it as well.

"Vampires ye might not be, but what purpose have ye' to be in Inczady's castle?"

It wasn't lost on Amy that even though the man had put down his cross, he still kept to his side of the stream. *He's no stranger to this place.*

"We're here to kill the Count," JD said. "What's your story? Why are you here?" he added, when the stranger gave him an odd look.

"The same, the same," the stranger replied. "Inczady and his clan of foul *nosferatu* killed me whole family. I 'ave tracked them from me home in the Isles back to their becursed homeland."

"What's your name?" Jeanne asked.

He looked at her with narrowed eyes. "Dumas 'twill suffice. And please," he spoke over Jeanne's voice as she started to introduce herself, "don't tell me yours. I've no interest in learning the names of people who most likely will not live to see the 'morrow's sunset."

Turning to Amy, he said, "Afraid to drink the water, are ye? Well, follow me, I know this castle as well as me own face. I've spent more'n a week learning its passages, all for this one glorious day, when I either rid the world of the Count's evil or join my family in heaven. Come, I know a room with food and drink where we can hide ourselves 'til morn."

Dumas strode past them, back down the trail towards the castle.

JD looked at the others. "I know he seems a little crazy, but we can use his help. What do you think?"

Boz and Neil agreed, and Jeanne nodded as well. Amy smiled and gave JD's arm a squeeze. "I'm with you, I think we can trust him," she said.

"Okay, so we'll follow Dumas. Let's go."

They traipsed back to the castle, keeping to the shadows as a bloated, yellow moon rose higher overhead. After entering through sluice gate, Dumas led the group through a winding labyrinth of passages and hidden hallways for almost fifteen minutes before holding up a hand.

"Quietly now. We've left the vacant portions of the castle and must cross a main passageway to reach the room I seek."

Creeping forward, Dumas peered around the corner into a corridor that seemed brightly lit in comparison to the ones they'd been traversing. "Quickly, follow me," he whispered, motioning them forward.

They scurried across the wide space like roaches caught in a kitchen light, glancing in all directions, alert for anyone approaching. Dumas had already opened a plain wooden door by the time Amy got across, and he whisked them into the room, shutting the door after them.

The sudden darkness disoriented Amy, and she stood still, afraid of bumping into anything. After a few seconds, dim shapes began to register, and she realized there was a strip of light where the door didn't touch the floor. As her eyes adjusted, she saw they were in some kind of storeroom. Shelves holding bread, potatoes, and canned fruits lined the nearest wall. Across the room were more shelves, stocked with blocks of cheese and earthen jugs sealed with wax stoppers.

"This is the pantry the vampires keep for their blood stock, and for the few human thralls who serve as slaves in the castle." Dumas pulled out a knife and carved wedges of cheese for everyone, while Ricky and Boz tore hunks of stale bread from the loaves and passed them around.

"Blood stock? What's that?" Amy asked through a mouthful of bread and cheese. The food was very dry, and she coughed a little as she finished speaking.

"You," Dumas said, pointing at Speedy. "those jugs contain water. Blood stock, me lass," he returned his attention to Amy, "is what all of ye were destined to become. Humans kept alive and used as food for the vampires."

Amy glanced down at the piece of cheese she held.

Food. To the vampires we're just like a carton of juice or a steak. She shivered, thinking how close they'd come to that fate.

Still might, a nagging voice said. *This little adventure isn't over yet, not by a long shot.*

"So how do you intend to kill the vampires?" Cliff asked, the first words he'd uttered since his rape.

Amy gladly gave up her own train of thought and listened to Dumas's response.

"With these." He opened his large satchel and exposed an assortment of weapons, including a crossbow, stakes, a mallet, hunting knives, and other items Amy couldn't make out.

"My plan is to attack an hour or two after sunrise. Vampires can move around in the daytime, as long as they don't expose their undead selves to sunlight. But those first hours after dawn are when we are most likely to find them sleeping."

He pulled out a handful of stakes and passed them around. "The most important thing is to kill the Master, the one who made them all. Kill that one, and the others lose much of their powers."

Reaching further into his bag, he pulled out a small hatchet, two long hunting knives, and three large crosses, each with the bottom filed to a point.

"I only have the one mallet, but if ye each carry a good-sized stone, ye can use them to pound the stakes into their chests."

Dumas held up one of the crosses and demonstrated how to shove it into the body of a vampire, where it would burn a large, painful hole.

"Each of the women should have one. The holy power of the cross negates the vampire's healing abilities." Dumas handed out the heavy weapons. "One of the men can have the hatchet, and another can take one of the knives. The second knife is for meself, as is the crossbow."

"How long until dawn?" Boz asked.

Dumas tilted his gray-haired head. "When I came upon ye, 'twas still almost five hours 'til first light. I would say three hours 'til sunrise, and then we should wait at least another hour before we attack. In the meantime, those of ye who wish to sleep should do so. I will awaken ye when 'tis time to be off."

Dumas pulled his stained and torn cloak about himself and settled back against a wall, his bag of weapons close at hand. He closed his eyes, but Amy had no doubt he was alert and ready to leap into battle at the first sign of danger.

Amy sat down next to JD, who lay propped up against some empty grain sacks.

"Aren't you going to try and sleep?" he asked her, glancing up as she gently stroked his hair.

"No, I'm too keyed up. You go ahead, you need the rest." She knew JD was one of those people who could fall asleep anywhere, in a car, at a party, even at the movies. She, on the other hand, took forever to fall asleep, and then woke up at the slightest sound.

Sure enough, it only took a few moments before JD started snoring. Movement in the dim light caught her attention as Jeanne came over to sit next to her.

"What's the matter, can't sleep either?"

"No, too wired. Maybe I should have some of what they're having," she joked, pointing at Dave and Chris. One of them had found a single, crumpled joint, and they were sharing it with Cliff and Neil. *Talk about an unlikely friendship. Apparently dope, like love, really does transcend all boundaries.*

"Yeah, it's tempting to just sit back and bake, pretend all of this is just a dream, huh?" Jeanne shook her head.

"I'll settle for just getting out of here alive and in one piece," Amy said.

"Do you think that's going to happen?"

Amy shook her head, not in a negative answer, just to express her lack of knowledge.

"I don't know. It seems like the odds are against us. But at the same time, considering all we've been through, the fact that we're still alive is mind-boggling. That's what gives me hope that we'll make it back home."

She looked over at JD, knowing a lot of their chances rested on his shoulders, which wasn't fair, but it was true all the same.

"It really is all up to him, isn't it?" Jeanne asked.

"I don't know how he's handling it, Jeanne," she confessed. It was the first time she'd had the chance to open up to another girl, really open up, about anything, in a long time. *Since Jeanne stopped talking to me six months ago, in fact.*

"When we walked into that carnival, three quarters of the people sitting in this room either didn't know JD or didn't like him. And now everyone expects him to be their savior. Do you know how that's eating him up inside?"

"But it shouldn't," Jeanne said. "He's not forcing anyone to follow him, we're choosing to."

"It doesn't matter, at least not to him. He's always been that way, from what Freddy's told me. Ever since his father died, and he sort of became the man of the family."

"I didn't know his father was dead. When did that happen?" Jeanne reached out and grasped Amy's hand in the dark.

"In middle school. He doesn't like to talk about it. Freddy told me it was a drunk driver. JD's family got some money from the insurance, but his mom had to go to work full time to pay the bills. That left JD to fend for himself. Apparently he used to sit in his room for hours, just writing stories or reading books. He also got in a lot of trouble, ditching school and getting into fights."

Amy stopped, realizing she sounded like some lovesick schoolgirl. They sat there in silence for a few moments, until Jeanne spoke again.

"You've got a really great guy there, Amy. I feel so bad about how we've treated you, and him. Don't ever let him go."

"Hey, we're past that now. Friends again, remember? And I don't plan on letting him go, any more than you plan on dumping Boz." Amy gripped Jeanne's hand tighter, letting her know she really meant her words about friendship. She sensed Jeanne's smile in response.

"You know what? If—*when*—we get home, the four of us should go out and get shit-faced."

"Sounds like a plan," Amy agreed, and both girls laughed. Feeling more relaxed, Amy said goodnight to Jeanne and snuggled down next to JD. In his sleep, he lifted his arm and draped it across her waist. Closing her eyes, Amy let herself drift away.

CHAPTER 20

JD

JD felt someone shaking his shoulder. It seemed like only a couple of minutes had passed since he'd fallen asleep. He looked up and saw Dumas's grizzled face hovering over him.

"Rise, boy. 'Tis time. Help me rouse the others, but for Jesus' sake be quiet about it. Remember, the *vampir* may not be sleeping."

He moved past JD and began the task of waking Neil. JD dragged himself up and shook Boz awake, then went over and did the same with Ricky. He left the girls for last, letting them have the extra few minutes of sleep.

Once everyone was awake, Dumas went over his strategy a final time. "We strike their sleeping chambers first. We'll not know which coffin the Master rests in until we open it, so 'tis likely we'll have to kill several lesser vampires beforehand, which may give him fair warning of our presence. If that happens, he'll attack without mercy, so be prepared.

"I will lead the way with the crossbow. Keep your eyes open and your weapons ready." Dumas nodded his head once and then opened the storeroom door.

JD and the others followed as Dumas took them up one level from the storage room, back to the main floor. They crept across the grand dining hall, the long table now cleared of its gruesome meal, the heavy tapestries pulled across the enormous windows to block out even the most meager of rays from the early morning sun.

Dumas led them past several doorways before stopping at one. To JD, it looked no different than the others. Without warning, Dumas threw the door open and rushed inside. After a moment, JD and the others ran inside as well.

The large, circular room contained no windows. Three tall candleholders were spaced around the chamber. Fat, greasy candles burned in the sconces, sending flickering shadows dancing through the room. Eight coffins occupied the center of the chamber. With an easy motion that indicated a strength not apparent from his diminutive stature, Dumas lifted one of the coffin lids. Inside lay the blonde vampire who had molested Freddy.

"Die, ye filthy leech!"

The vampire hunter swung the stake down into the creature's chest and pounded on it with the mallet. The undead woman arched up, her mouth open in a soundless scream, eyes wide, and then she collapsed backwards, already decomposing.

JD opened a coffin. Inside was the male vampire who'd killed Chantrelle. JD placed his stake over where he judged the heart to be and raised his stone.

Before he could bring it down, the vampire's eyes opened and the creature grabbed the stake. Turning his head away to protect himself from the hypnotic gaze, JD swung the stone down, smashing it onto the vampire's scaly hands and driving the stake down into the ribcage.

The first strike only impaled the vampire partially; it let out a harsh scream as it thrashed and bucked inside its coffin. JD hammered the stone down twice more and the vampire went rigid. It gave one last gasp and then the body caved in on itself.

JD turned away from the rotting corpse in time to see Dumas kill another. Next to him, Boz opened a coffin and two arms snaked out and grasped his shirt, pulling him forward. The linebacker cried out, placing both hands against the edge of the coffin and using all his considerable strength to avoid the vampire's teeth.

"It's the Master. Quickly, help your friend," Dumas shouted, pulling out another stake. JD grabbed Boz as the football player suddenly went limp, caught by Inczady's hypnotic power. JD pulled back as hard as he could, straining against the Master's hold.

"Help me," he gasped, feeling his feet slide forward and his grip starting to give.

Just when he thought he was about to lose Boz, hands grabbed his waist and held him steady. With a last burst of strength, he yanked back and then tumbled onto the floor as Boz came free of Inczady's grasp. He ended up in a heap on top of Neil and Ricky, with Boz's crushing weight across all of them.

JD fought his way out of the pile just as Inczady leaped from his coffin and advanced on Dumas. There was no time to run forward and help. Instead, JD grabbed Jeanne's wooden cross and threw it at the Count's back. It struck Inczady between the shoulder blades. A brief flash of light followed, and the vampire's suit burst into flames.

The Count whirled around, his face already morphing into inhuman form, blood-red eyes glowing within a mask of wrinkled, scaly skin. A flattened, bat-like nose sat above a slash of an opening, where hundreds of triangular, serrated teeth showed in the lipless mouth.

Inczady howled in anger and sprang at JD. Dumas's crossbow bolt caught the flaming form in mid-leap, high on the shoulder, sending him crashing into one of the empty coffins. Bluish-white fire spread from Inczady to the coffin.

Around them, other lids opened as the rest of the vampires awoke. Dumas put another bolt into Inczady, this time through the center of the Count's chest, pinning Inczady to the burning wood.

"Stake the beast. Hurry," Dumas yelled, loading another arrow.

JD rushed forward with his rock, feeling in his pants for another stake. His hand came up empty. He turned to yell for someone to throw him one, and Ricky was right next to him, already leaning down with one of the

sharpened pegs. He placed it over the Count's heart and held it.

"Now!" Ricky shouted.

JD swung the rock as hard as he could. A thick, black ichor spewed out of the wound, spraying JD and Ricky.

Ricky laughed crazily. "Take that, motherfucker!"

Rancid fluids continued to pour out of Inczady's chest from around the stake, the vile discharge running down his body and onto on the floor. The vampire's flesh softened, turned black, and began to liquefy, the stench of corruption filling the air. As the decomposition continued, the spongy tissue pulled away from the crossbow arrow pinning it to the coffin and the body slumped to the floor, little more than a sack of putrid, pulpy flesh that continued to burn until it disappeared completely.

The four remaining vampires tried to run for the door but found themselves surrounded. Dumas, Boz, and Speedy each staked one. Neil and Cliff took care of the final monster. For a moment, no one spoke, and then Dumas laid his crossbow on a nearby coffin.

"'Tis over," Dumas said. A single tear ran down his cheek. "I can return home now and mourn my family properly. I thank ye, each and every one of ye, for helping me rid the world of this evil." He walked past JD and Ricky, heading back to the main hall.

"If they're all dead, then why are we still here?" Chris asked no one in particular.

"Oh, hell," JD said, grabbing the crossbow and heading out after Dumas. "Maybe Inczady wasn't the Master after all."

JD caught up with Dumas in the dining hall. "This is kind of hard to explain, but I don't think we killed the Master," he said, holding up a hand to stop Dumas.

"What do ye mean?" the vampire hunter asked him.

"It means things are not always what they seem, old fool."

The vampire that fell from the ceiling was barely recognizable as the beautiful woman who'd sat at Inczady's side during dinner, her face half-human and half-beast. With a howl of anger, she thrust a clawed hand through Dumas's chest. Dumas gave one shuddering gasp, and then his head sagged forward. The female vampire withdrew her arm, his still-beating heart grasped firmly in her talons.

"You entered my home and killed my children, and my blood-mate. For this I will see you all dead."

The dark-haired vampire crushed the heart, sending flesh and blood spraying in all directions, and turned her Hell-filled gaze on JD, who lifted the crossbow and fired from the hip. The bolt caught the queen in the neck, driving her backwards directly into Boz, who shoved a stake into her but missed her heart. She whirled around and backhanded him, sending him

crashing into the others as they entered the room.

A dozen more vampires fell from the ceiling. One kicked the crossbow from JD's hands. It reached for him with lizard-like claws, but Amy leaned past him with her cross, forcing it back.

"Get in a circle, backs to each other," JD yelled, and the others hurried to comply, forming a rough group. Just as quickly, the vampires surrounded the humans.

Jeanne, Amy, and Traci used their crosses to hold the vampires back, while the rest of them stood by with stakes and knives.

"Kill them," The Queen shouted at her brood.

"We cannot get past the holy icons," one of them said.

"Fool." The Queen grabbed the vampire and threw it at Jeanne, knocking her into Speedy and Cliff, and sending all of them down in a pile.

Jeanne managed to hold her cross out as the vampire fell on her, impaling itself on the sharp wood, and then it was a mad scramble as everyone tried to get out from under the flaming vampire. With the circle broken, the other vamps surged forward.

"Look out!" JD pulled out his knife and pushed Amy behind him.

Boz went down under two of the monsters. He tried to buck the creatures off, but they had their claws dug into him. JD rushed over and slit one vampire's throat. The second monster lunged at him, but before it could clamp its wolf-like jaws on him, Boz buried his hatchet into the vamp's back. With both vampires incapacitated, Boz made quick work of them with his stake.

JD didn't wait around to say thank you; he turned back to the main fray, worried about Amy. He saw her immediately, standing next to Jeanne, the two of them using their crosses to swat at any vampires that came close.

Slowly the fight moved into the entry hall, and JD began to think there might be a chance, but then the Queen picked up the crossbow. With a shrieking, high-pitched laugh, she fired a bolt through Dave's arm. He went down, screaming in pain. The remaining vampires moved in closer, and JD realized the Queen could pick them off one by one before they reached the door. Only one option remained.

"I need you to distract the Queen," he said to Speedy and Ricky. "If I can make it to the windows, I can pull down the drapes."

"No. I'm faster," Speedy told him, and before JD could say anything, the record-setting wide receiver took off, racing past the startled vampires.

The Queen spun to her left and aimed the crossbow at Speedy. At the same time, JD reared back and threw his silver knife as hard as he could. The blade lodged in her stomach and her shot went wide.

"Stop him," she shouted, pointing at Speedy.

The wide receiver reached the windows and without breaking stride

leaped into the air, hands outstretched as if for an imaginary ball, and grabbed the heavy cloth halfway up. For a moment he hung suspended, more than enough time for a nearby vampire to jump up and dig its claws into his legs. Speedy cried out in pain but hung on. Under the combined weight of the two bodies, the age-weakened fabric finally gave way, tearing from its rod and flooding the room with bright sunlight.

Caught in the immolating rays of the morning sun, several vampires burst into flame. Others scurried into far corners of the room, cowering and moaning in the safety of the shaded areas.

"Speedy." JD started towards the tangled pile of heavy cloth, but something caught his ankle and pulled his leg from under him. His head hit the stone floor and dazzling points of light exploded in front of his eyes. At the same time, a red-hot bold of pain ran through his injured knee. A cry of pain started in his throat, but a heavy weight landed on top of him, turning the shout into a wheezing gasp. The roasted-pork odor of burnt vampire flesh filled his nose. He tried to crawl away, his injured leg a tortured weight dragging behind him. Then there was more pain as claws pierced his arm and strong hands flipped his body over.

The Queen pressed the charred remains of one arm against his throat, pinning him in place. Her monstrous face, burnt flesh hanging in tatters, leaned close.

"Human filth, your blood belongs to me." A long, forked tongue flicked out from between rows of dagger-shaped teeth.

JD closed his eyes and waited for the end.

Instead of fangs tearing through his neck, her weight suddenly disappeared.

He opened his eyes and sat up, his knee screaming in protest. The Queen stood next to him, one of Dumas's wooden crosses protruding from her back. Her shark-wide mouth gaped open, thick, black blood drooling from her lips. She reached back with her one good arm and tried to remove the cross, the skin of her back already beginning to burn.

Amy stood there, the crossbow in her hands.

"Die, bitch."

She fired point blank into the Queen's chest, knocking the vampire over into a bright shaft of sunlight.

With one last feeble cry of pain, the Queen exploded into flames, leaving nothing behind except a charred piece of wood and JD's silver knife.

All around the room, the last vampires moaned and fell to the ground, disintegrating into lumps of decomposing flesh.

"JD, are you all right?" Amy knelt next to him.

He wrapped his arms around her. "You saved my life."

"You saved mine a long time ago."

"Somebody help me," Ricky called. He was struggling to untangle the tapestries covering Speedy.

JD tried to stand, but his leg buckled as soon as he put weight on it. He grabbed at Amy's shoulder to keep from falling.

"Sit down," she told him.

Against his will, he sat and watched as Boz and Neil helped Ricky pull back the heavy cloth. Clouds of dust from the ancient material created sparkling motes in the streaming sunlight. They exposed Speedy, only to gasp and step back as bright red blood fountained into the air from a deep cut on his thigh. Of the vampire that had attacked him, only a brown stain remained.

"Oh, shit." Neil tore off his sweatshirt and pressed it against the wound. Boz leaned down and added his weight to the makeshift compress, but the pool of blood continued to spread across the stones.

"Speedy. Talk to me, bro." Ricky gave his receiver's shoulder a shake.

Speedy opened his eyes. He reached up and grabbed Ricky's arm. "I think Chantrelle's gonna be pissed at me for joining her so soon."

His eyes closed again and his hand fell to the floor.

Before anyone could speak, the shimmering effect of the dust brightened and the room faded away.

Plywood walls came into focus around JD. A few feet away, Ricky and Boz knelt over Speedy's dead body. Off to one side, cheap plastic models of Dracula and his bride stood with their arms up, blocking their faces from a poorly-painted picture of a sunrise through a window.

"Fuck me," whispered Ricky, tears running down his cheek. Lips pressed in a tight scowl, he stood up and walked away from his friend's corpse.

JD leaned his head against Amy's leg.

So many dead, and there's still another room to go.

CHAPTER 21

JD

"JD, can you give me a hand?"

Boz's quiet tones intruded on his despair. JD opened his eyes and looked up. Boz knelt next to Dave, who lay on the floor, clutching his arm. A crossbow bolt stuck out of it, halfway between his shoulder and elbow.

"I need you to hold his arm while I slide the arrow out. Neil's getting a bandage ready."

Gritting his teeth, JD stood up, using the wall for support, and limped across the room. He sat down next to Dave, his leg extended out to the side, and grasped the injured arm above and below the point where the arrow had penetrated.

Dave moaned in pain and turned his head away.

Without any warning, Boz gave one fast pull and the arrow slid out.

Dave screamed and banged his good arm on the floor.

A small trickle of blood followed the arrow out. Neil peered at the wounds.

"I think it's okay. There'd be a lot more blood if it hit a major vessel. Go ahead and wrap it up. Dave, can you bend the arm?"

Dave balanced his weight on his good arm, and slowly flexed the injured limb. He gritted his teeth, and sweat broke out on his brow, but he was able to make a fist and bend the arm almost halfway.

"It hurts." His face expressed just how much. "But it's better than it was. Not as bad as the time I broke my leg skiing."

"The arrow missed the bone, went through the meat of the arm," Boz said. "Be thankful it didn't have a big head on it, or a serrated edge, or it might have gotten stuck in there. Then we'd have been screwed."

"So now what do we do?" Amy asked.

JD looked at her. Her expression showed that she knew exactly what had to be done, she just didn't want to be the one to say it.

Once again, it was up to him.

"We have to go through the last room. We have to finish this, once and for all."

"No!" Everyone turned at Traci's shout. "I can't take it anymore. It's not fair. We're gonna die. You're gonna make us go in that room and we're all gonna die. I won't..."

Neil's hand stopped her in mid-sentence. The slap snapped her head to the side with a sound like a gunshot. Traci stood still as a statue, mouth open, a red handprint already forming between her ear and chin.

"Shut up. We've all seen our friends die, we've all been hurt, we're all scared. You're going through that door if I have to throw you, so stop whining."

"Fuck you." Spittle flew from Traci's lips. "If you touch me again, I'll kill you."

Neil slapped her a second time, harder. Her head rocked back and blood flew from a split lip. Cliff and Chris grabbed him before he could hit her again.

"You selfish whore. If there was any real justice in this world, you'd be dead and Josie would be alive. Everybody hates you, you're just too blind to see it."

Cliff and Chris pulled Neil away, dragging him into the main hallway.

"Fuck you, asshole." Traci shot him the finger and then turned her back on everyone.

From the way her shoulders were shaking, JD was pretty sure she was crying, although he wouldn't want to guess for whom. He waited for Ricky to say something to her, or put an arm around her, but the blonde quarterback just stood there, a dull look on his face.

That's the look of someone who's reached their limit. I think Ricky's checked out for a while.

"C'mon, everyone, let's get out of here." JD grabbed Amy's hand, and together they walked out into the hall.

CHAPTER 22

Amy

Amy leaned against the wall, feeling too stiff to sit down. Her shoulder throbbed where the vampire had bitten her, temporarily drowning out the aches and pains of the bruises already growing dark on her skin.

Of course, compared to some of the others, I've gotten off pretty easy. She watched as the rest of the group gathered around her and JD at the bottom of the ramp.

A large, purple bruise colored JD's left cheek, and his forehead sported an ugly lump complete with a crusted-over cut in its center. He'd taken a piece of material from one of the mannequins and tied it around his bad knee, over the elastic brace, in an effort to keep the joint immobile.

Boz had one arm over his ribs but was still on his feet, thanks to the great condition he kept himself in. Jeanne and Chris looked like Amy felt, bruised and cut, although neither of them seemed to have suffered any major damage.

Neil had tucked his injured arm inside his jacket, using it as an improvised sling. Cliff and Freddy still refused to speak to anyone. Cliff's movements were stiff and slow, especially when he walked and Freddy's normally ruddy complexion was pale. Dark purplish-blue smudges gave his eyes a sunken appearance.

Ricky seemed to be in good shape, physically, but he wore an expression that reminded Amy of dogs in the pound, waiting for that last walk down the hall, the walk that led to the little room in the back.

Then there was Traci. Coming on top of her injuries in the zombie chamber, her rape had pretty much pushed her over the edge. Spots of blood dotted the crotch of her pants, and bruises covered almost every visible area of flesh. Her pale face and matted hair screamed mental institution escapee or homeless crack addict. It was hard to believe she'd once been the homecoming queen.

JD rubbed his eyes and then the back of his neck. "Okay, how're we doing on weapons? I still have my knife."

"Jeanne and I have our crosses." Amy held hers up.

"I lost everything," Boz said.

No one else spoke up.

"That's it? Nothing else?" JD's expression grew even grimmer, if that was possible. "All right, we'll have to make do. Let's go upstairs and see what we're dealing with."

"Don't bother. I can tell you," Jeanne said.

Something in her voice hit Amy like a stomach punch. Next to her, JD

stopped in his tracks.

"A couple of us tried to open it when we first got here, before all this started." She looked around at each person before delivering the news.

"It's Hell."

Two simple words, but Jeanne's solemn tone managed to convey her fear.

"Hell? What's that supposed to mean?" Ricky asked, his voice cracking like a pubescent boy's.

"It means Hell, capital H," she said. "Demons standing around a pit of lava full of roasting bodies."

The haunted expression on Jeanne's face was somehow worse than her words.

"And we're supposed to get out of there alive?" Neil's eyebrows rose into half-circles over wide eyes. "I'm not much into religion, but even I know that when you go to Hell, that's it. Game over. You don't come back."

"None of us will ever leave here alive," whispered Traci.

"Actually, that might not be true," Cliff spoke up. That got everyone's attention.

"Think about it. Hell is where the souls of the damned go, right? That's what my Sunday school teachers always said. If you weren't good in life, you go to Hell when you die. But we're not dead. We're only passing through. It's just like any of the other rooms. We'll only be trapped until we figure out how to escape."

Neil shook his head. "We'll still be trying to escape from Hell, a place of unbearable suffering. There's going to be some kind of monster to fight. Odds are it's the Devil. Satan, Beelzebub, call him what you like. Do you really believe we're going to survive that fight? Hah."

Neil slammed his hand against a nearby wall.

"Wait, I think Cliff's onto something." Amy wasn't sure about her idea, but it seemed *right* somehow.

"There're all sorts of stories about people beating the Devil. There's even that old country song about it. Maybe we'll have to win a mental battle, a challenge of some kind, rather than a physical one."

"This isn't Bill and Ted's Adventure, you dumb bitch." Ricky's dull voice and slack expression didn't match the venom of his words. "We're not here to give Satan a wedgie."

"No, I think Amy's right," Jeanne said. "History's full of tales of Satan tempting mortals, or getting them to participate in challenges where the winner keeps their soul. I think we might have a real chance."

"So how do we win?" Freddy asked, surprising them all by speaking.

"We have to believe in ourselves," Amy said. "Sure, we've all done some bad things in our lives, but nothing that could be considered a mortal sin, unless one of you is hiding a really big secret. So this shouldn't be an

automatic death sentence for anyone."

Amy looked around, saw a few undecided faces in the crowd. Then Ricky spoke up, giving her the biggest surprise of the night.

"Cherry's right. We have to believe in ourselves, or there's no chance of winning. That's something every coach has told us on every team I've ever played for. Talent isn't enough; you have to want to win. You see it all the time, where the underdog beats a better team."

Ricky glanced around the room and then turned his bloodshot eyes on JD. "I still think you're an asshole, Cole, but you're the one who has to lead the way."

JD opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He just nodded.

"Before we go, there's something we should do." The words popped out of Amy's mouth before she realized what she was saying. "We need to pray."

No one seemed surprised at her statement, maybe because they felt it too, or maybe because they were still stunned from Ricky's speech. But together they bowed their heads or closed their eyes. Everything was quiet for a moment, and then Amy realized they were waiting for her to lead them.

Great, I've never said a prayer in my life. My parents were the most unpracticing Christians I've ever known. She opened her mouth, and again the words seemed to flow out on their own.

"God, hear us now in our time of need. Please watch over us and protect us from whatever is waiting to do us harm. Uh, amen."

A chorus of quiet 'amens' came back to her.

"All right, if we're gonna do it, let's do it," Boz said. Grabbing Jeanne's hand, he started up the walkway to the final door.

CHAPTER 23

In the darkness, the Proprietor flinched as Amy intoned her prayer. Up to that point, the power had been building nicely; the argument between Traci and Neil had been absolutely exquisite.

Now the power stuttered and stalled, its essential evil faltering at the touch of goodness. Spiders of worry emerged from the Proprietor's skin, and he quickly brushed them away before his minions took notice.

Rarely did a group of humans make it so far. But the one called Cole had unexpected reserves of strength and leadership to go along with his intelligence, and he had the woman Amy and the man Boz on either side, acting as his unknowing anchors.

Could he be a Power?

The thought flitted by too fast to stop, further weakening the black energies flowing around him.

Impossible. No, they would succumb eventually, as they always did, and then the release of power would be...

Amazing.

SECTION IV: To Hell and Back

CHAPTER 1

Amy

Except for the unbearable heat, Hell surprised Amy.

The by-now familiar reality shift had left them standing in the middle of a scorching, barren wasteland, similar to what the badlands of the Western U.S. might look like after a nuclear war.

Off in the hazy distance, a toothy, jagged line of mountains ran along the horizon. Closer by, numerous rocky buttes and prominences rose up like giant monoliths, their wind and sand-eroded surfaces colored in reds, grays, and yellows.

Scrubby, alien-looking trees dotted the landscape. Deformed cacti sprouted sickly green and purple flowers that filled the air with the odors of carrion and sulfur. Pools of noxious liquids, somewhere between mud, shit, and blood in consistency and color, lay scattered across the desert floor.

Yellowish-white bones and dry, mummified body parts protruded from the sand or lay on top of it in small piles, but no masses of tortured souls wallowed in misery or cried for release. In fact, the place seemed devoid of anything but mutant plant life for as far as she could see.

Overhead, the silver sky was so bright it hurt the eyes, yet Amy couldn't discern any point of origin for the light. It came uniformly from every direction, ensuring no shade existed to provide even a modicum of relief from the heat.

"This is like Ansel Adams on acid," she said to Jeanne.

"Yeah."

"It's goddamn hot here," Dave said, wiping his forehead with his good arm.

Ricky paused in pulling off his sweatshirt. "It's Hell, asshole. What didja expect?"

The intense heat was like a slap in the face with a burning towel. Amy unbuttoned the jacket JD had given her, but didn't take it off. She'd already started to sweat, but she wasn't quite ready to walk around in only boxers and a bra.

A massive butte rose up behind them, over a hundred feet high and at least twice as wide. At its base began a hard-packed trail, leading away from where they stood and off into the distance. The path wound around the giant stone edifices towering over the sandy plain.

Rising heat waves rippled the air, tempting them with illusions of distant water.

"Well, this seems pretty obvious," JD said. "Anyone want to bet the trail

leads to some kind of castle?"

No one took the bet.

"So, I guess we start walking?" Chris asked.

"Yeah. Everyone ready?" He motioned for Amy to join him.

"Everyone stay close together and don't wander off the path. There's probably a lot of hidden dangers here. No sense in someone getting hurt or killed in a stupid accident before we even get where we're going."

After what she judged as a half hour of walking, Amy's feet were hot, blistered, and tired. Her legs ached, and her mouth felt drier than a box of kitty litter. The heat had already burnt away her self-consciousness and she'd chucked JD's jacket.

The only blessing so far was the fact that the strange light wasn't burning their skin.

As they moved past a pile of desiccated corpses, Dave stopped. "Hey, I think I know that guy."

"What the hell are you talking about? How can you know a skeleton?" Ricky snorted. "I think the heat's frying what's left of your brain, dopehead."

"No, seriously. I think it's Benny Epstein. He's this rich kid from California who lived on my floor last year. He always wears green and red Converse hi-tops, just like those. They're designer sneaks."

Dave veered towards the bodies.

"Dave, stay on the trail," JD yelled.

"What are you doing?" Chris asked his friend.

"Benny always carried a gun, a two-shot Derringer. He said it was his good luck charm, saved his grandfather during a robbery or something. Maybe it's still in his pocket," Dave called over his shoulder, as he waded through the coarse sand, slipping and sliding his way to the body.

When he reached it, he ran his hands through the tattered pants, and then gave an excited holler. He held up his hand, showing them the small, shiny gun.

"I got it."

"Hurry back," JD said.

Dave began making his way back, and then came to a sudden stop.

"What's the matter?" JD moved to the edge of the trail but didn't step off.

"My foot's stuck. Here, take this," he said, and tossed the gun to JD.

"Can you see what it is?" Freddy held a hand up to shield his eyes from the glare.

Dave dug into the sand around his buried foot. "It feels like a vine or a rope."

He grabbed at something with his good hand and pulled. For a brief

second he stood bent over, arm and back tensed against an immovable object, and then the thing came loose and he fell backwards into the sand.

Around him, the sand shifted and fell in on itself as if exiting down a drain. Dave cried out and flailed his arms as something rose up from the sand.

And kept rising.

"Oh, god." Amy took several steps back. Next to her, Jeanne did the same thing.

The behemoth that emerged behind Dave resembled a cross between a scorpion and a praying mantis. Over fifteen feet in length, it carried wicked-looking serrated claws on its front legs, like a lobster. Six additional sets of legs supported the massive beast.

The shiny carapace was bluish-black in color. Large, saw-toothed mandibles, set below two huge compound eyes, opened and closed, drooling obscene pus-yellow fluid from between them. The mantis-scorpion's tail waved back and forth more than ten feet above the ground. A thin, sword-like appendage jutted from its tip.

A claw darted forward and grabbed Dave by the legs. The sound of crunching bone was audible even over his agonized screams, which came to an abrupt halt when the creature thrust its tail down and speared him through the chest. Dave's eyes bulged and reddish froth poured from his mouth. The monster's multi-faceted, prismatic eyes reflected hundreds of images of his twitching, bleeding body.

The creature withdrew its tail, leaving a gaping hole in its wake. Using the smaller, paddle-like feet on its rear legs, it dug back down into the sand. In a moment it was gone, and Dave with it.

Stunned silence filled the air, as everyone stared out at the deceptively peaceful desert scene.

"Dave," whispered Chris. "It killed Dave."

"Sonuvabitch." Ricky said. "What was that?"

"Maybe this reality's version of the trap door spider." Cliff wiped something—sweat or tears, Amy couldn't be sure—from his eyes. "It sits under the ground, and when a bug comes walking by and steps on its web, the spider leaps out, grabs its dinner, and goes back underground to eat."

"And we're the bugs," Neil added in a soft voice.

"From now on no one leaves the path," JD said.

"How do we know the path is any safer?" Ricky asked him.

Amy caught the tone of fear in his voice, so different from his usual belligerence or sarcasm.

"We don't, but if whatever's responsible for all this wanted us dead, it could just send a dozen of those things after us. No, there's something else in store for us, and this path is supposed to take us to it."

"If that's supposed to be comforting, it's not," Boz told him.

"No comfort to give, bro."

"Yeah, I hear you."

They started walking again, and Amy glanced back one final time, marking the place of Dave's death in her mind. As she did so, she noticed a figure sitting on the trail about ten yards behind them.

"Hey guys, what's Traci doing?"

Everyone stopped and turned around.

"Traci, c'mon!" Jeanne called.

"Screw you, I'm done. I'm staying right here." Traci crossed her arms over her chest, raised her chin, and glared at them.

"Traci, you've got to come with us. We need to stay together. Besides, it's not safe here," JD told her.

"Bullshit. You just said the path was safe. Besides, it can't be any worse than wherever we're going."

JD chewed his lip, but didn't say anything.

Amy took a few steps back down the trail. "What if we all have to be there in order complete our challenge?"

"Then the Devil, or bogeyman, or whatever-the-hell is in charge here can send a car for me if he wants me so bad. He can use a fucking transporter for all I care, but I'm not walking."

"Leave her here," Chris said. "She's a pain in the ass anyhow. Deserves what she gets."

"We can't just leave her," JD said. "We could carry her. Boz, what do you think?"

Boz glanced at Traci, then Ricky, and finally at JD.

"We can't carry her. We're exhausted already, and we've got a long way to go. We need to save our strength." He ran a hand across his crew-cut hair. "I hate to say it, but I don't think we have a choice. If she doesn't want to walk, we go on without her."

"What? You'll leave her here to die?"

Jeanne placed her hand on JD's arm. "It's her choice. Just like it's our choice to go on. You can't force her."

Amy stepped in front of JD. "I know you feel like you're abandoning someone to die, but you're not. Jeanne's right."

"This is wrong on a lot of levels," JD said. "You don't leave people to die."

"And you can't force people to do something they don't want to do."

JD looked at them all, his eyes pleading for someone to change their mind.

No one spoke up.

"Fine." He turned around and walked away.

Amy squatted down next to Traci. "Are you sure this is what you want to

do?"

Traci stuck up her middle finger. "Eat me, Cherry. When this is all over every one of you is going to be sorry for what you've done to me tonight." Traci closed her eyes, effectively ending the conversation.

Amy stood there for a moment, trying to think of something to say. Finally, she gave up and walked back to where Jeanne waited for her.

"Well?" Jeanne asked as they hurried to catch up with JD and Boz.

"I guess this whole supernatural, life and death experience isn't going to make Traci change her ways."

Jeanne gave her a funny look, but Amy didn't feel like talking about it any further. "Forget it. Traci was being Traci, as usual."

Jeanne caught the hint and didn't ask any more questions. Amy picked up her pace a little more and joined JD, taking his hand in hers. He glanced at her, one eyebrow raised over a tired, brown eye.

"I think she's finally lost it," she said, in response to his unasked question.

"I'm not surprised. For the first time in her life everything isn't revolving around her, and she doesn't have daddy or a boyfriend to make it right again."

"Yeah, what's the deal with Ricky? He actually agreed with you before. Do you think he's changing for the better?"

"No, I think he's in the same boat as Traci. After this is over, he'll probably make up a whole reality in his head where he was the hero who saved everyone."

"That's too bad. Something like this should change you for the better, make you realize how precious life, and friends, are."

"You're a real philosopher today, aren't you?" JD teased with a smile.

Amy started to answer, but a distant scream stopped her.

"What was that?" Neil asked.

Everyone looked back the way they had come. Amy squinted into the general brightness, but between the intense light and the shimmering heat waves, she couldn't see if anything was behind them. Then a shape became discernable, quickly growing larger. Sparkles of light seemed to flare within it.

Boz pointed. "There."

The object flew towards them at a height of about fifty feet. As it drew closer, its features became recognizable.

"Holy crap," Jeanne murmured.

The massive-winged dragon was easily thirty feet in length. A crocodilian head sat at the end of its serpentine, elongated neck. Behind it trailed a tail as long as the entire body. Scintillating gold, green, and red scales covered it from one end to the other, each one reflecting light in miniature explosions.

Powerful legs hung underneath it, something alive and struggling in the grasp of its claws.

"Oh, no," JD said, and Amy felt her stomach drop.

The dragon flew past, giving them a clear view of Traci cradled in its giant talons. A litany of curses reached them from inside the organic cage holding her.

"At least it didn't hurt her," Freddy remarked.

"No, that will come later," Neil said.

The mythical beast sailed past without a downward glance, traveling in the same general direction they were headed. Its dazzling form dimmed in brilliance as it disappeared into the hazy distance.

"She told Hell to come get her, and it did," Cliff said.

"Asshole." Ricky pushed the smaller student aside and strode down the dirt road at a brisk pace.

Cliff started to say something back, but Boz grabbed his arm.

"Cool it. Remember, she was his girlfriend."

Cliff shut his mouth and nodded. He moved to the back of the group with Neil and Chris.

Boz and Jeanne walked up to Amy and JD.

"We better leave him alone for awhile," Boz said. "Give him some space."

"Do you think whatever's up ahead is going to kill Traci?" asked Jeanne.

Even in the burning heat, JD's answer chilled Amy.

"No, I'm afraid it's going to keep her alive."

CHAPTER 2

Amy

They walked for another hour before they reached their destination. The trail cut through a narrow pass between two buttes and curved sharply to the right. As they rounded the corner, Amy got her first view of what waited for them at the end of the road.

"Jesus, it looks like something MC Escher or Salvador Dali would have created."

The castle, unlike anything built on Earth, rose out of the haze approximately a quarter mile away. As they drew closer, she found it more and more difficult to look at the building without suffering from intense vertigo.

The structure was enormous, perhaps a half mile in length, but it wasn't the size that triggered her mental discomfort. Stairs led up the sides of walls and then abruptly ended, well short of any doors or landings. Towers and turrets jutted out at odd angles. Several appeared to be melting in the heat, brick and stone dripping like candle wax.

A huge, multi-tiered fountain emerged horizontally from one wall, spouting bilious green water that flowed straight out and then disappeared into thin air. Windows and doors created random patterns across the stone facade, many of them sitting sideways or upside down. Battlements stuck out in random directions rather than sitting atop the outside walls.

Not a single living being moved anywhere. No voices or sounds disturbed the heavy silence.

The trail led to a drawbridge spanning a moat of putrid fluid. From the horrendous stench emanating from it, Amy was positive it was shit.

The gate was open, but it showed only a plain stone wall where the entrance should have been.

"Now what?" JD wondered after they'd held their breath and crossed the loathsome moat. He reached out to touch the building, but stopped before he actually made contact.

"I don't want to touch this thing for some reason."

Amy nodded. "There's something wrong here. But it doesn't matter. We still have to go inside."

"Cliff and I have a theory," Neil said. "We think the object we're seeing actually extends into other dimensions, and while we can't see all of it, our subconscious understands there's something more than what our five senses are telling us."

"It's manifesting itself individually in each dimension, while occupying

space in all of them at the same time," Cliff added.

"So it could look different?" JD asked. "Like a vampire castle in one world, Frankenstein's castle in another, and a haunted carnival in our own?"

"Exactly." Neil said. "Plus, time and space wouldn't work the same as in our own dimension, which is why walking several miles on one of the alternate worlds equates to only a few steps in our own, and why hours here are only minutes there."

"Bullshit theories aren't gonna help us," Ricky said.

Jeanne shook her head. "They can if they're the right theories. Keep talking, Neil."

"The way I see it, the castle is pivotal to our situation. Almost everything that's happened to us has happened *inside* a building. Ricky's fight with the chainsaw guy took place in a cabin, and then a boathouse. Our confrontations with the aliens took place in a house and a school. Boz, when you guys fought the demon minister, it was in a church."

"Plus the mall, and the different castles we've been to," said Cliff.

"What are you trying to say, that it's the castle doing all this? That it's alive?" Jeanne asked him.

"Alive? Sentient? Maybe. Or maybe it's just another manifestation. Maybe the carnival's not haunted, but a protrusion of another dimension into our world. Once we stepped inside, crossed the boundary, we entered a place where our rules no longer apply."

"None of this is going to do us any good if we can't get inside," Amy said. She kicked at the dirt, sending a scatting of pebbles at the wall.

And right through it.

"It's not real." Boz stuck out his arm and it disappeared into the solid-looking stone and mortar.

"I don't feel anything."

He leaned forward, his head and shoulders following his arm.

"Boz, don't," Jeanne shouted.

"It's okay," came the muffled reply.

He pulled his head back out. "No sweat. It's just another castle inside, only a helluva lot larger."

Jeanne slapped his arm. "You could have been eaten by a demon."

He hugged her. "Sorry, babe. I didn't think about that."

JD waved his hand through the stone, and Amy couldn't help but shiver as she imagined the wall suddenly becoming solid and slicing his arm off at the wrist.

"This isn't where we have to worry. Whatever brought us here wants us inside, just like Neil said. I can feel it."

"Well, let's not keep it waiting," Boz announced.
"Ready?" JD asked, holding his hand out to Amy.
She took a deep breath. "Sure."
She closed her eyes as they stepped forward.

CHAPTER 3

The Proprietor smiled. His long, black tongue flicked across his scaly lips.

So close, so wonderfully close.

Across the carnival, time remained frozen, flags and scarves and litter petrified in mid flight. Men and women stood immobile as statues. Several of the bodies were no longer complete. More than one minion had let its hunger get the better of it.

With each passing moment, with each new drop of power produced by the fear, anger, and guilt occurring within the Castle of Horrors, the circle of the carnival's influence grew just a little larger, freezing animals in their tracks in the surrounding fields and woods.

From all around came moans of anticipation as the hungry began to gather.

Soon there would be enough power to break the circle, and for one unholy hour the night would be theirs, free to wreak havoc in the nearby town, ravage the bodies of the loathsome human cattle, and consume their souls.

Oh, how wonderful the feeding would be!

CHAPTER 4

JD

JD felt as if he'd entered some kind of psychological nightmare. The stadium-size hall contained no furniture, decorations, or signs of habitation. No torches or candles burned anywhere. No windows broke the solid, dark gray walls, yet somehow there was light enough to see by.

The hot, dry air had a muffled quality to it, reminding him of the soundproof rooms bands sometimes practiced in. Voices didn't echo, and their footsteps made no sound on the hard floor, which seemed to be an endless block of dull gray granite or marble.

Then there were the doors. They lined all four walls as far as the eye could see, each one identical in height and width. Made of rough-hewn wood, with cast iron hinges and handles, they were twice the size of ordinary household doors.

"This is, like, messed up to the max," Chris said. "My head hurts. Just show me which one's the exit so I can go home."

"Where can they all lead to?" Jeanne asked.

"Only one way to find out." Boz grabbed a handle and pulled. A blast of super-hot air billowed out, forcing him back a step. The odors of roasted meat and hot tar followed along.

"Oh, damn," he muttered, turning his face away.

They stared into a scene that was something Dante might have written about. In the center of a huge cavern sat a fiery pit filled with screaming people. Monstrous, red-skinned parodies of human beings stalked the edge of the pit, poking long, pointed staffs at anyone trying to climb out.

All the bodies in the pit were terribly burned, their skin melted and peeling so that muscle and bone showed through the wounds. But as arms, heads, and limbs rose above the churning, scalding lava, the flesh instantly healed, only to be seared away again when the tortured beings were shoved back into the pit.

People climbed on one another, forcing their fellow prisoners under the super-hot liquid as each person tried to keep as much of themselves above the surface as possible, only to be sent under again by someone else. The screeching and wailing of the damned filled the air.

One of the demons noticed the open door and laughed, its ear-piercing howl scraping along nerve endings like a thousand fingernails scratching at blackboards.

Boz slammed the door shut, cutting off the horrific milieu. "They can't all be like that, can they?"

Amy went to the next door and opened it. This time there was nothing to see, only a never-ending expanse of black emptiness, stretching on and on into eternity. Then, from out of the nowhere, a colored, swirling mass came streaking towards them.

It was a soul. JD didn't know how he knew that, he just did.

"Help me!"

The plaintive cry inside his head startled him. Around him, the others all jumped as well.

"All alone! All alone!"

As the soul drew closer, the door wrenched itself from Amy's hand and slammed shut, trapping the condemned soul in its realm of eternal isolation.

"I don't want to open any more doors," Amy said in a small voice.

JD took her hand and squeezed it. They turned away from the door and stopped. A demon stood before them. Before they could react, the bipedal creature held up its multi-segmented arms, hands open and empty.

"Please, do not be alarmed."

The demon's masculine voice sounded human, even though it came from a pair of mandibles that would have been more at home on a grasshopper, as would the giant, bulbous eyes taking up most of its head. Only five feet in height, it wore no clothing. Its dark brown body had no features to indicate its sex. The legs and feet, like the upper limbs, were insectoid and multi-jointed. No ears or nostrils graced its head.

"I am here to guide you to the Master," it intoned. "Please, follow me."

"Like, what if we don't want to see your Master?" Chris asked.

The creature opened its jaws. A long, pink tongue shot out, striking Chris in the chest, just below his left nipple. The tongue zipped back into the demon's mouth, taking a quarter-sized piece of shirt and flesh with it.

"Ow!" Chris slapped a hand to his chest. A dribble of blood leaked out from under his palm.

"The Master wishes to see you. You may follow me or stay here. If you stay, my people will feast on human-flesh tonight. The choice is yours." The demon turned and walked away from them.

"Not much of a choice, is it?" Freddy said to no one in particular. No one answered him. As one, they fell in line behind their guide.

The demon led them past several dozen doors before stopping in front of one. Nothing distinguished the portal from its neighbors, and the choice seemed completely random. Nevertheless, the demon opened the door and ushered them inside.

Tapestries and hangings covered the walls of the room, each depicting horrible scenes that JD fervently hoped were not representations of actual events.

Captured in vivid color, demons raped, mutilated, and tortured humans.

The artists had spared no details. The woven illustrations showed anatomically accurate renderings of internal organs, bloody severed limbs, and worse. JD tried his best not to look at the hangings, but they were everywhere.

The occupants of the room were not much better on the eyes. Six demons stood guard around a throne, three to each side. At least seven feet tall, they had the bodies of lions and the heads of grizzly bears, but with pink, wrinkled skin instead of fur. All of them held long spears.

"Oh, God, look at the chair." Jeanne's words turned JD's attention away from the guards.

As bad as the decorations and demons were, the throne brought hideousness to a whole new level. Made of twisted, desiccated human bodies, the chair was somehow *alive*. Open eyes moved in the contorted faces. From behind stitched lips came low moans of despair.

Amy gagged.

"Don't look," JD whispered to her.

Amy made a small 'mmh-uhmf' sound and kept her hand over her mouth. A voice from behind the throne cut off JD's next words. With a start, he realized not all the hangings hung on walls. Some separated the room they were in from another.

"Ah, so our visitors have arrived." The booming voice, deep and dark, had a quality that made JD think of gravel being ground against metal.

The hangings behind the ghastly, living throne slid aside, revealing a scene worse than anything they'd seen all night.

Standing in the next room was a demon that made all the others seem harmless by comparison. Easily eight feet tall, its red, pebbly skin reminded JD of a Gila lizard, or a plucked chicken leg. Its feet were simian in shape, but its hands were distinctly reptilian.

The monster's chimeric grotesqueness continued with its vaguely canine face. Multiple rows of triangular teeth filled the short snout. There were no external ears, only small holes on either side of its head, and it had the large, golden-yellow eyes of an owl or eagle.

"Welcome to Hell, my friends," the Master said, spreading its arms wide. "Your friend has already been enjoying our hospitality."

Behind the beast, Traci Trachsel hung spread-eagle from a pair of crossed metal beams. The iron mechanism lay tilted at a forty-five degree angle. Numerous cuts, bruises, and abrasions covered her naked body. Her head lolled to one side and her hair had fallen forward to cover her face.

"Is she dead?" Amy whispered.

JD shook his head. "I can see her breathing."

The demon lowered its heavy bulk into the living throne. The deformed faces contorted in pain, and their muffled cries grew worse.

"Miss Trachsel has been very entertaining since she arrived here. It has been a long while since I felt the pleasure of human flesh."

"You bastard! I'll kill you." Ricky rushed towards the throne, fists clenched.

Two of the guards knocked him to the ground with their staves. The other four stepped forward, creating a line of defense between their ruler and the humans.

"Temper, temper, Mister Roberts," the demon said.

Although the texture and timbre of the voice were harsh and rough, the pronunciation of words made JD think of a professor or lawyer, both proper and aloof.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Satan. This is my kingdom." The demon Master leaned back, and with an imperious wave of one clawed hand indicated that the guards should let Ricky get up and rejoin his group.

"You know who we are?" Jeanne asked.

"Of course, Miss DiCenzo. As Supreme Ruler of Hell, I know every soul that enters my kingdom. I know your deepest fears and darkest secrets. For instance, Mister Cole fancies himself a writer. No doubt this whole experience has been worse than any story he could have written."

Satan smiled at JD, a smug grin that looked particularly repellent on his horrid face. "Not that he could write a good book even if his life depended on it."

"Billy Zymansky," the Demon King continued, turning to Boz. "The farm boy with the heart of gold. Oh, I can't wait to see what Hell has in store for you. Perhaps it will have something to do with you cheating on Miss DiCenzo last year, when you let Miss Trachsel blow you in the locker room?"

Boz clenched his fists but kept silent.

"Jeanne DiCenzo. You want to be a lawyer, correct? I'm sure you'll find plenty of those here to speak with. Oh, and before you castigate your boyfriend for his infidelity, you might want to tell him about that time you got it on with your cheerleading coach. After all, honesty is so important to a relationship. Such a shame Billy couldn't have watched that Sapphic encounter."

Satan stood up and approached Chris. "Christopher O'Shea. Such potential, but throwing it all away for a life of partying and dope. Your dear DeShane has already met someone new, someone with goals in life and a real talent for eating pussy. She'll go on to great things, while you are doomed to spend your life getting stoned and jerking off to cable porn. Pity."

The reptilian head shifted from one person to the next like the second hand on a clock, as their captor continued his vicious accounting of their sins. JD felt like a bystander at an accident scene; not wanting to see but unwilling to look away.

Tick.

"Clifford White. It's not just the color of your skin that makes you a minority in this group. You're quite possibly the smartest person here, if IQ tests are accurate. So why did you need to cheat on your SAT test this year? Was the extra fifteen points worth selling your soul, so to speak?"

Tick.

"Neil Jarvis. Shame about Miss Dylan. Such a lovely young lady. Wasted too much of her life mooning over the wrong fellow, but she came around in the end, didn't she? Now you're left wondering, 'what if?' What if you'd gone through with your plan to kill Ricky last year, using that poison you have hidden in your closet? Want to know what would have happened? You would have been caught and found guilty, and then sentenced to death.

"The irony is that if you'd gone to prison, you wouldn't be here now, and you'd have lived a much longer life. And you'd have gotten laid before you died, much as Clifford did earlier."

The demon continued talking, spouting its evil information so fast its targets didn't even have time to react.

"Ricky Roberts." The demon turned his cold, hateful gaze on the quarterback. "Big man on the football field, but over the past few hours I daresay your classmates have come to see the sniveling coward you keep hidden away. Perhaps now would be a good time to share some of the other secrets in your closet, such as your attraction to other men."

Tick.

Satan pointed a clawed finger at Freddy.

"Frederick Perillo. A real ladies' man. Why settle down, isn't that your motto? Do your friends know about the two girls you got pregnant, and how you convinced them to get abortions? One of them had complications and almost died on the doctor's table. All because you were too selfish to take responsibility for your actions."

The demon king stopped in front of Amy and gently stroked her chin. Amy flinched, but didn't make a sound. Satan chuckled and moved his hand away.

"Ah, yes. Last but not least, Amy Cherry. You used to be part of the 'in crowd,' but gave it all up for *love*. How touching. But no matter how much you try to hide it now, inside you're still the same stuck up, neurotic, self-loathing debutante you always were. Does your precious JD know about the fits of depression you used to have, how you allowed boys to degrade you sexually because deep down you hated who you were?

"Does he know you once tried to commit suicide, just to humiliate your family? That you spent two weeks in a mental ward?"

Amy sucked in her breath but didn't respond to the demon's taunts.

Satan burst into laughter as he sat down on his throne again, the deep,

heavy chuckles rumbling out of his barrel-shaped chest like a truck stuck in low gear.

JD stepped forward. “Big deal. You know all our dirty little secrets. Why are we here? Why not just drop us in a pit of fire and be done with us?”

“Excellent question. Hell is normally the last stop for the souls of the dead, but you nine people are special. You’re living beings who came here of your own free will. There are very specific guidelines that must be followed in your case.

“Each of you will be sentenced to your own private chamber of Hell. You must figure out how to escape before you die. If you survive, you are free to help the others. Quite simple, really.”

“What do you mean, our own chamber?” Amy asked, tears still running down her cheeks.

“Hell isn’t the same for everyone, Miss Cherry. For instance, the souls you witnessed in the fiery pit were wayward Christians, whose concept of eternal damnation involves fire and brimstone. Therefore, that is what they received.”

Satan held up one razor-clawed digit. “There is one other rule. One of you will remain behind, at the mercy of my minions, as an incentive for the rest of you. I will give you a moment to choose.”

“There’s no choice necessary,” JD said. “I’ll stay.”

“No!” cried Amy.

“Ames, I’m the strongest one here, I’ll be okay.”

“Actually, I’m the strongest one here,” Boz said. “It should be me.”

“Normally, I’d agree with you, Boz, but you’re beat to hell. That leaves me.”

“Bull. You can barely walk.”

“You’re both wrong,” Amy said, stepping between them. “I’m the one who has to stay.”

“What?” JD felt his heart drop to the floor at her words. “I can’t let you do that.”

“JD, listen to me. This is very important,” Amy drew him away from the others, as far away from the demon king and his guards as she could.

“No way you’re doing this,” JD said. An image flashed through his mind, Amy up on that metal cross instead of Traci, beaten and bloody, fouled to the point of death by the attentions of the demons.

He’d never let that happen.

“Shut up.” Amy poked him with her finger. “You have to go into one of those chambers, because you’re the only one who can escape. Remember when the Master revealed our sins? Didn’t you notice he didn’t have one for you?”

“What do you mean? I was first. He told me I was a terrible writer, even

though that's what I want to do for a living. That's a sin. It's, um, the sin of pride, right?"

"No, it's not, because you've never said you were a great writer, just that you *want* to be. The rest of us had real sins, real things we've done that we're ashamed of."

"I've done things I'm ashamed of, lots of them."

Amy shook her head. "But nothing bad enough to qualify as a sin. And with me, you've been nothing but honest, more than I have. I meant to tell you about those things, I wanted to, but I was afraid."

"Amy, it's okay, what's in the past doesn't matter to me," JD told her, cupping her face in his hands.

"Exactly. You're honest and forgiving. You're not afraid to admit your faults. That means your private hell isn't going to be nearly as bad as anyone else's. Scary and dangerous, maybe, but nothing you can't handle, because it won't be based on anything bad you've actually done."

"I don't know, this doesn't seem right. I'm not a saint or anything. Besides, if I leave you here, I'll be putting you in danger. Wouldn't that be a sin?"

"Not if it's my choice. JD, nothing those demons can do to me will be any worse than what's waiting for me inside one of those chambers. My personal hell would be bad. Real bad. Frankly, I'd rather face the demons. You're the only one who can do this."

"Great. It's not enough I've had to be responsible for everyone's lives. Now it's their eternal souls. Isn't there another way?"

Amy kissed his cheek. "This is the right thing to do. I can feel it." She stopped JD from saying anything else by putting a hand to his lips. "No more talk."

She turned to face the throne. "We've chosen. I'm going to stay behind."

"Excellent." Satan rubbed his raptor-like hands together. "We're all going to have so much fun with you. I promise things will go nice and slow, so you will feel all of the pain."

Amy turned and touched JD's chest. "Don't forget what I said. You're special."

"Special? What do you mean, he's special?" Satan rose half out of his throne.

"He's special to me. I love him," Amy said, meeting the sulfurous gaze head on.

Something flashed across the demon's face, something that might have been fear or confusion, and for the first time JD thought maybe Amy was right.

Hell's Master glared at Amy and snarled, "Let's see how special you think he is when he fails to save you from your fate."

Satan stood up. "It is time. I command you to Hell." He clapped his hands three times.

On the third clap, the world went black for JD.

CHAPTER 5

Amy

Amy watched JD and the others disappear in bright flashes of light.

Each to their own private hells. I hope they all make it back. Something told her they wouldn't all be so lucky.

Hot, taloned hands grabbed her from behind. She drew in a breath to scream, and corrupt, foul odors assaulted her lungs.

JD, please hurry.

Then there was only pain.

CHAPTER 6

In Whitebridge, the outer boundary of the carnival's influence increased in circumference by several feet. Demons and imps shed their human guises and cavorted amongst the immobile patrons, raking at them with claws and teeth.

Tents and booths opened their eyes and extended questing tendrils of mottled, gray flesh outwards in search of food. Mouths opened on the amoeboid tentacles and bit chunks of flesh away from nearby humans.

The Proprietor bellowed harsh laughter as the dark energies filled him.

Soon, oh, so soon.

His evil howls echoed across the silent fields and woods. A squirrel cowering inside a hollow tree died as its heart burst in mid-beat. Animals and birds fell dead in their tracks, brains leaking from noses and ears.

The Proprietor raised long, spindly arms over his head and danced to the music of pain and suffering.

As soon as the one *dies, the walls will fall. And then Whitebridge will be ours.*

CHAPTER 7

JD

JD opened the door to Amy's room. Loud music, some hip hop dance tune, played inside.

That's weird. When she was working, her preference tended towards blues and jazz, anything without lyrics. When she wasn't painting, pop rock and eighties new wave were her favorites.

He looked down at the CD in his hand, an old Cure album Amy'd wanted for awhile. He'd bought it on his way over to her house.

The bedroom door was closed, which also struck him as odd. She usually kept it open when she painted, so the fumes didn't make her dizzy.

As he put his hand on the doorknob, he heard other noises over the blasting music. Laughter. More than one person. Not wanting to go any further, but unable to stop himself, he opened the door and stepped into the bedroom.

Amy sat on her bed, a joint in one hand and a beer in the other. Sitting around her were Traci Trachsel, Ricky Roberts, and MC Clark. A haze of pot smoke swirled around them.

"Oh, look who's here," Traci laughed. "Check it out, Mister Nice Guy. I told you she hadn't changed."

Amy snorted and beer sprayed from her mouth. "Hey, JD. Guess what? I'm back on the cheerleading squad."

She took another hit off the joint and giggled. "Oh, I almost forgot. I'm dumping your ass for MC. I do love that black cock of his."

Before JD could say anything, an unseen hand shoved him out of the room and the door slammed shut in his face. JD found himself next to the cabinet where Amy's father kept a gun for protection—*He does? Since when?*—and he took out the two-shot derringer.

It would be so easy. One shot for her, one for yourself, and all the pain would be over.

No. This can't be happening. She must be drugged, or maybe we're just not meant to be. But I can't kill her.

JD dropped the gun and sank to the floor, holding his head and crying.

CHAPTER 8

Clifford

"This is a most amazing discovery," Professor Yarmouth said. "If the formula works, I dare say you'll be able to increase the IQ of any human being by several factors. Tell me, how are the primate studies going?" Yarmouth turned away from the data on the computer screen and looked at Cliff.

"They're not complete yet, but the initial results are promising," he told his mentor. "In the first twenty-four hours every specimen's IQ increased dramatically, and the new levels have remained steady over the past two weeks. But I'll need to run another two trials before I put together my data for publication."

"Hmm. Well, I'm afraid I have a bit of bad news. I heard this morning that Jenkins at Harvard is only three weeks away from human trials. While his formula is not producing results as exceptional as yours, should he succeed in publishing first, your work, astounding as it is, would be seen merely as an offshoot of his. If we're to publish first, you'll need to complete your primate trials this week."

"But how was he able to do that?" Clifford couldn't believe his bad luck. There was no way to speed up the trials. "He was months behind me. He couldn't have obtained permission to perform human trials so quickly."

"He didn't have to, Clifford my boy. He went to India to complete his work. Their laws governing experimentation are much more lenient. He'll be using prisoners. His intention is to overlap his primate and human trials."

"Dammit!" Cliff hurled his pencil across the lab. "What can we do? There's not enough money in my grant to set up another research lab in India, not on this short notice."

"Great scientists have always found a way, my boy," Yarmouth said. As he left the lab, he stopped and stared at the small refrigerator that housed Cliff's formula. He tapped the top of the refrigerator with his pipe.

"Yes, they've always found a way, haven't they?" With that cryptic statement, Yarmouth left the lab, the doors hissing shut behind him.

Cliff stared at the professor's retreating figure, blurred by the double layers of Plexiglas that maintained the negative pressure environment of the lab.

What was that about? It wasn't like the professor to waste words. Always find a way? Sure, with enough time and money, two things I don't have to spare. Years ago a scientist would just fill a syringe and inject some volunteers, or even himself, and then...

Wait. He couldn't have meant...?

Yarmouth could never come out and say experiment on yourself, but wasn't that what some of the most famous scientists in history had done? If it worked, he'd have solid proof, enough to publish an abstract before Jenkins. After that, it wouldn't matter. He could take another year or two to complete the actual work. He'd be first, meaning it would be *his* formula all the pharmaceutical companies would be bidding for.

Cliff opened the cooler and pulled out a vial. Three milliliters of golden-yellow liquid sat inside, the exact amount needed for a human weighing one hundred sixty-five pounds. He pulled the contents into a syringe and walked back to his computer station, where he initiated a new file. It would be vital to accurately document each phase of the experiment.

> "October thirty-one, nine p.m. What I am about to do is not sanctioned by Oxford and violates the rules of human experimentation, but I have no choice if I'm to be the first to demonstrate a viable intelligence-stimulating agent. I am injecting myself in the right cubital vein."

Clifford hit the 'save' key and then took off his lab coat. Rolling up his sleeve, he swabbed the crook of his elbow with an alcohol pad and used his left hand to inject the formula.

He had just enough time to recap the syringe before a burning sensation ignited in his brain. He grabbed his head with both hands, gritting his teeth against the pain. He knew well enough what was happening, even through the liquid fire attacking his mind. Forcing his hands back to the keyboard, he continued typing.

> "The formula has begun stimulating the electro-chemical reactions that control intelligence. Neuron activity is enhanced, and dormant areas of the cerebrum and cerebellum are being activated. The pain, while intense, should only be momentary."

Sure enough, his head started to clear even as he finished typing. And with the cessation of pain came clarity.

> "Amazing. Everything makes sense now. I can see the solutions to all the world's problems, from global hunger to colonizing the moon. It all seems so simple. My formula has worked better than I could have imagined."

For a moment, his emotions soared as high as his new-found intellect.

Then his happiness came crashing down as he realized the error in the compound, the mistake that neither he nor Yarmouth had noticed before.

"The extra carboxyl group. The angle of alignment is all wrong."

His fingers flew across the keyboard as he tried to keep up with his thoughts.

> "I see now that the error lies not with the formula, but with the stimulation of the neurons themselves. My formula would never have been successful in human trials. Neither will Jenkins'. In fact, I estimate less than twenty-four hours before the chemical will begin permanently degrading the brain cells, leading to a complete loss of all but the most basic of mental functions."

He paused in his typing.

By tomorrow morning I'll be the functional equivalent of a three year-old child.

He took a deep breath.

> "I have less than a day to write down all my ideas. I can still make my mark in the annals of science and history, as the man who brought the world into a new and better age.
>
> Even if I won't be able to comprehend the accolades."

CHAPTER 9

Ricky

Ricky found himself on the football field. A quick glance at the scoreboard told him it was last year's state finals. His team was down by two touchdowns, with three minutes remaining before halftime.

This is when I spiked the ball and let time run out rather than risk turning it over.

The whistle blew, and the ball slammed into Ricky's hands. Just as he had in the real game, he turned with a quick motion and threw the ball into the ground. The siren sounded, ending the half, and Ricky trotted off the field with his team.

How is this Hell?

In the locker room, he barely listened as Coach Wallace gave his halftime talk. He tried to remember what he'd done in real life. *I know I said something after Coach finished talking, got everyone fired up. And we won the game by three touchdowns.*

As Coach Wallace droned on, Ricky looked around the locker room at his teammates. Boz stared back at him, a look of disgust on his face.

What's his deal? Does he know I made a move on Jeanne the night before the game? Did she say something?

Boz gave him the finger and turned away.

That bitch. She must have said something. Not that it mattered. No one would lay a finger on the star quarterback, not with the championship game a week away.

Ricky glanced at MC, saw him jab a needle into his arm, just above the elbow.

Juice? He's juicing right here in front of everyone? What the hell is going on? Nobody else paid any attention to MC.

Ricky closed his eyes and rubbed them. When he opened them again, nothing had changed. *Did all this really happen that day, and I was just too hyped to notice it?*

Coach Wallace finished his pep talk, and Ricky stood up. This was it, time for him to charge up the troops. He opened his mouth to speak, but just then Traci walked in, dressed in a pair of skimpy panties and a lace bra. A lazy, sensual smile curled the corners of her mouth.

"C'mon, boys, time for the halftime party," she announced.

MC pulled out a bottle of vodka, took a big swig, and then handed it to Speedy. Traci planted a big, wet kiss on MC's lips, grabbed Speedy's hand, and led them around the corner to the showers. The rest of the team, including

Coach Wallace, followed, hollering and slapping each other on the back.

From beyond the wall of lockers, Traci's voice sounded loud and clear.

"Oh, yeah! Fuck me! Fuck me hard!"

Ricky closed his eyes again and tried to block out the sounds.

CHAPTER 10

Jeanne

The phone rang, interrupting Jeanne from her case files. Even though it was only her second year at Hollister and Hollister, she'd been asked to assist on one of the firm's biggest trials ever. As third chair, the majority of the research and statement preparation fell on her shoulders. This case would either bring the firm national recognition or ruin it.

"Hello?"

"Jeanne, it's Lucy Zymansky."

Why would Boz's mother be calling me at the office?

"Hi, Lucy, I can only talk for a second. What's going on?"

"Jeanne, I don't know how to tell you this. It's Billy. He got hurt during practice. They think he may have broken his back or neck. He's barely conscious and he can't move. I'm on my way to the hospital right now. I already got you a ticket to Florida. The plane leaves in three hours. That gives you plenty of time to pack and bring the kids to your parents."

No. NO! The world went gray. From a distance, Jeanne heard herself say, "I'll leave right away. I'll call you when I get into Miami airport."

She hung up the phone and rushed into the senior partner's office, ignoring his secretary's call of 'Is everything all right?'

No, it's not. My husband is paralyzed, you stupid cow.

She explained the situation to Kevin Hollister, ending with, "All my notes and research are done. The files are on my desk and in the computer. I was just finishing my last minute review. Karen can handle third chair until I get back."

Hollister looked at Jeanne and shook his head, a stony expression on his aristocratic face.

"No, I'm sorry, that just won't do. Karen's not up to speed on this case like you are. We can't be searching through papers and computer files in the middle of court."

"Kevin, you don't understand. My husband is lying in a hospital, maybe paralyzed."

"I understand your dilemma, Jeanne, but you need to focus here. If we lose this case, we're through. All of us. The firm is kaput. If we win, we'll all be able to write our own ticket forever. We simply cannot afford to lose you, not with opening statements at nine a.m. tomorrow."

"But it's my husband," Jeanne shouted, hoping that if she yelled loud enough it might sink into Hollister's brain.

The senior partner merely leaned forward, his elegantly-coiffed silver hair

never moving, his glowing red eyes showing less emotion than when he ordered his morning Danish.

"I know, and I am not unsympathetic. But let's be realistic. It will be hours, maybe days before he's awake enough to realize you're there. All you'll be doing for the twenty-four hours is standing in a hospital waiting room, drinking foul-tasting coffee and waiting for the doctor to tell you the results of the tests."

Hollister placed his hands on the desk, rings glittering on all his fingers. Long, black nails tapped the polished wood.

"Here is what I propose: Stay here at the office tonight and bring Karen up to speed. Tomorrow you'll sit as third chair for the opening statements, and then at first recess you can go to the airport and catch a plane to Miami. We'll even pay for a first class ticket. Now, I think that's more than fair, don't you?"

"And what if I leave tonight anyway?" Jeanne asked.

Hollister made a small *tsk-tsk* noise and shook his head.

"Then we'd have no choice but to terminate your employment with Hollister and Hollister. And, I assure you, it will be quite difficult for you to find another firm willing to take you on after word of your carefree attitude makes the rounds, if you know what I mean.

He's talking about blackballing me. And he could do it, too. Hollister has a seat on more than one bar association board. Jeanne gritted her teeth and acceded to the inevitable.

"Fine. I'll stay until lunch tomorrow, but then I have to leave."

Hollister gave her the same smile he got when he caught a witness in a lie, the toothy grin of a shark that smells blood in the water.

"Yes, yes, that's fine. Now go find Karen and get to work."

CHAPTER 11

Chris

The lights in his room were nice and dim. His books sat piled up on the desk in front of him.

Time to start studying. I really need to pull my grades up.

He opened his history text, but the words immediately went blurry as he tried to read.

Oh, man, shouldn't have huffed that doob. Maybe a jolt of caffeine will help.

Chris went downstairs to the fridge, intending to grab a Mountain Dew. Not only did it kick start the system, but nothing cured cotton-mouth better.

Passing through the living room, he caught site of a letter addressed to him, sitting on top of the day's mail.

At first, he couldn't make sense of the words, but then their meaning slowly filtered through the haze coating his brain.

She's dumping me? That can't be right. He rubbed his eyes and then read the letter again.

> *Dear Chris,*
>
> *I didn't want to do this in a letter, but I think it's probably best. I don't want to see you anymore. You and your friends are worthless stoners. You're failing all your classes, and you don't even care. I've met someone else, someone who's smart, funny, and has a good head on their shoulders. Goodbye, Chris. I hope you straighten out your act before it's too late.*
>
> *DeShane*

"Bitch!" Chris crumpled the note and threw it across the room.

She nags about me failing, but then goes and does something like this. How am I supposed to study, knowing she's out with someone else?

He started back up the stairs, his soda forgotten. Back in his room, he glanced at his books but veered instead to his bed.

I can't think right now. Gotta mellow first. Chris leaned back and flicked the television on to the Cartoon Channel.

A few minutes later, his snores filled the room while on the TV Stewie Griffin went from one misadventure to another.

CHAPTER 12

Neil

Neil stepped through the door of Whitebridge Middle School. First bell hadn't rung yet, and students moved through the maze of packed hallways like ants in a nest.

Out of reflex, he made his way to his old locker. The weight of a book bag sat on his back, but it wasn't until a couple of kids pushed him against the wall of lockers that he realized how much had changed, or more accurately, hadn't.

Holy crap, I'm thirteen again.

"Hey, fat boy," one of the bullies shouted. The boy reached out and jabbed Neil's ample gut with two fingers.

"Lookit that tummy jiggle. He's a bowl of Jell-O," the second kid laughed.

"Bite me, asshole." The words were out of Neil's mouth before he could stop them.

The hallway around them went quiet as the nearby students, with the unerring ability all school kids have, sensed a fight about to start.

"Looks like your mouth's as big as your ass," snarled the first bully, "I don't like big mouth, fat-ass geeks."

The boy—*Robby Avalon,* Neil remembered—drove a fist into Neil's stomach, knocking the wind out of him. Neil fell to the floor, wheezing and holding his belly.

Avalon pressed one sneaker against Neil's chest. "Don't ever mouth off to me again, pizza face, or I'll put you on the no-teeth diet."

Avalon and his friend, Jimmy Cooper, walked away, laughing and high-fiving each other.

The other students, many of them breathing a sigh of relief that they hadn't been singled out for some of Avalon's attention, started laughing too, pointing at Neil and making snide comments. No one helped him up.

The bell rang and the students migrated in lemming-like fashion to their classes. Neil waited until the hall emptied out before picking himself up and heading for the nearest bathroom. In the long mirror, he saw a reflection that was at once alien and all too familiar: a grossly overweight teenager with a bad case of acne.

"No," he cried, tears of shame and anger flooding eyes magnified by thick, black-rimmed glasses. "This isn't me. I lost the weight, I don't look like this anymore."

Neil punched the mirror, shattering the glass. He threw his book bag to the floor and ran out of the school.

CHAPTER 13

Fred

The insistent buzzing of the alarm roused Fred from a beautiful dream. He'd been single again, tearing through the girls at Whitebridge High just like in the old days. He reached out and hit the 'off' button, silencing the annoying tone. Next to him, Darla slept on, snoring into her pillow, her enormous body taking up way more than her fair share of the bed.

God forbid she'd ever get up and fix me breakfast. Just once *I'd like to come downstairs and find a cup of hot coffee waiting for me.*

It was a pipe dream and he knew it. It had been years since Darla had seen the sun rise. Or cooked a meal, for that matter.

Once the kids were old enough to get themselves ready for school and grab a Pop-Tart on the way out the door, Darla had fallen into an unchanging routine of pulling her walrus-shaped body out of bed around ten, eating half an Entenmanns's Danish log, and spending the morning with her friends, Oprah and Doctor Phil.

At noon, while Fred made do with a quick PB&J and an apple between chores, she'd scarf down a couple of sandwiches, a bag of chips, and a plate of cookies or a bowl of ice cream.

Following her afternoon nap, a thirty-minute visit to the bathroom that left half the house uninhabitable, and People's Court, she'd take care of dinner—the phone and take-out menus were all within easy reach of her recliner. Then it was more television and a sleeve of Oreos or a half box of Ring Dings while Fred helped the kids with their homework, got them ready for bed, did the dishes, and took out the trash.

He usually hit the pillow around eight, exhausted from a full day of taking care of the farm and family. Darla would lumber into bed sometime after Letterman ended, waking him up with her heavy breathing—asthma, not passion—and thumping feet, rocking the bed springs when her massive bulk hit the mattress.

If he was lucky, whatever she'd had for dinner would sit nicely in her stomach and she'd fall asleep, snoring away like a bull moose in heat. If he wasn't, then he'd get woken up periodically through the night by the machine gun sound of her farting.

He didn't keep the window over the bed open all year round just because the fresh air felt good.

"Here we go," he told his reflection in the mirror. "Another wonderful day."

Freddy dragged himself downstairs and started the coffee pot. While it brewed, he retrieved the newspaper from the front stoop. Flipping to the local section, he frowned.

Oh, more good news.

His old friend JD Cole had just signed another book deal. Eight million fucking dollars. Beautiful. That would balance out the millions Amy made from her paintings. Some people had all the luck.

Why couldn't I have met someone like Amy, instead of being saddled with a wart hog like Darla?

Oh, she'd seemed nice enough at first, a fine piece of ass. But then she'd gotten pregnant. Next thing he knew, he was married with a rug rat on the way.

Even that hadn't been so bad. Darla lost most of her pregnancy weight, and between her and her elephant of a mother, they'd kept the baby out of his hair.

But then she'd gone and gotten pregnant again. This time, she didn't bounce back. In fact, she didn't even try. As much as she ate while pregnant, she ate more afterwards. After two years of marriage, she'd been fifty pounds heavier than when they'd met.

Of course, a man still had needs, and she'd been accommodating in the sack, at least a few times a year. That was how they'd ended up with brats three and four.

These days Darla tipped the scales at three hundred and forty pounds, the kids—who were all porkers themselves, no one took after ol' dad—were in elementary school, and he had to run the whole damn farm by himself since he couldn't afford to hire any help.

Yeah, great life. And now I gotta read about JD making millions, standing there with his skinny wife and no kids.

Fred slugged back the last of his no-brand coffee, the bitter brew already attacking what was left of his stomach lining, and headed out to the barn.

Some days he thought he'd be better off dead.

Or better off if everyone around me was dead.

CHAPTER 14

JD

JD knocked on the open door.

"Come in, Mr. Cole. Please, sit down," Doctor Kittrell said.

JD took a seat in one of the cheap, vinyl-covered chairs positioned in front of a desk littered with files and x-rays.

"We need to talk about your fiancé," Kittrell said without preamble.

A muscle twitched under JD's left eye. "When can I see her?"

"Later this afternoon. She's not even in post-op yet," the tall, distinguished-looking surgeon said. Designer glasses framed his red eyes.

"But first I need you to be aware of a few things. Amy's injuries from the accident were very serious. We had to repair her small bowel, her liver, and one kidney. She has numerous broken bones, including three in her back and several in her face."

Kittrell paused.

"There's more, isn't there." JD leaned forward. "What aren't you telling me?"

"The accident destroyed large portions of her face. We had to remove her left eye. I can give you the names of some top plastic surgeons, but we're talking about months and months of recovery time."

Kittrell glanced down at Amy's file. "Do you want me to go on?"

JD nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He felt numb from the surgeon's words. He'd known Amy had been in bad shape, but he hadn't realized how bad.

"Right now both her arms seem to be paralyzed. We won't know to what extent until the swelling in her spinal cord goes down, but it's possible she'll never move them again. The condition of her leg mean's she'll probably be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life."

Dr. Kittrell stood up. "She's going to need all of your help and support. She'll be in a lot of pain at the beginning, and she's going to be deeply depressed. Now, I suggest you go get something to eat and then come back around five o'clock. By then she'll be in the ICU recovery room."

The doctor escorted JD out of the office, said goodbye, and strode down the hallway towards a set of swinging doors labeled "Surgical Ward, Authorized Personnel Only."

JD went to his car, shoved the key in the ignition, and then leaned back, eyes closed, remembering the events of the last two days.

Amy had insisted on walking home. JD wanted to drive her but she wouldn't let him.

"The fresh air will feel good," she'd said.

It wasn't the first time she'd walked the three blocks separating their apartments. But this time it proved to be the wrong choice. Ricky Roberts and MC Clark, both drunk out of their minds, had been speeding.

He'd heard her screams and the squeal of tires. Running outside, he'd found her on the side of the road, bloody, barely alive, twisted into shapes the human body wasn't meant for.

Later on, the police had found Ricky's car stuck in a ditch, Amy's blood, clothing, and skin smeared across the grill. Ricky and MC sat on the hood, passing a bottle of whiskey back and forth.

The cops had arrested Ricky, but now he was out on bail, courtesy of his father.

JD pounded the steering wheel.

Goddamn Ricky Roberts.

Amy would never be able to paint again, dance again. Her beautiful face would never be the same. And God only knew what the emotional scars were going to be like.

He threw the car into gear and pulled out of the parking lot, headed across town. Parking in front of Ricky's house, he opened the glove compartment and retrieved the small pistol

Why is that in there? Who does it belong to?

He put in Amy's favorite CD, and waited for Ricky to appear.

CHAPTER 15

Boz

Boz walked up the dirt road that led to the farmhouse. He paused at the gate, duffle bag over his shoulder. Memories swirled through his mind, some good, some bad, most blurred and mutated by the passage of time.

This was the house where he grew up, where he'd spent the first eighteen years of his life before going off to college.

When he'd left, he'd had $500 dollars in his pocket, a football scholarship, and one goal: to make it to the NFL.

Everything had been great until JD Cole and Amy had convinced Jeanne she'd be better off with someone smarter, someone who moved in a more elite crowd. Next thing he knew, she'd started dating some yuppie friend of Cole's.

Thinking of Jeanne brought back the memory of that night. He'd been home for spring break. He'd gotten drunk, something he rarely did, and that's when JD, Amy, Jeanne, and the new guy had walked into the bar. Before he could stop himself, he'd started hitting the law student. JD tried to break it up and lost all his front teeth for his trouble.

What followed was like a bad dream. The arrest, the court dates, the conviction for aggravated assault. He'd wound up spending two months in jail. But it had been more than enough to get him expelled and end his chances of a pro football contract.

Now here he was, coming home a failure. No degree, no football career, and less money in his pocket than when he'd left.

Welcome home, loser.

"Shit." He pushed open the gate.

CHAPTER 16

JD

JD opened the door to Amy's hospital room. The two nurses finished whatever they were doing to her monitors, nodded to him, and then left him alone with Amy. He placed the bouquet of flowers where she could see them without turning her head. Carnations and roses, her two favorites.

Tears blurred his vision as he saw Amy for the first time since the accident. Straps held both her arms at her sides, and IV tubes draped from their poles to her forearms like so much Spanish moss. One leg hung from a sling. Bandages covered most of her face and head, leaving only one eye, her nose, and her mouth visible. A body brace ran from her neck to her waist.

"Amy, I'm here." He kept his voice low. Her eye opened. Her lips started to move, but JD hushed her.

"Quiet, honey. It's all right now. You're alive, and you're going to get better. For now you need to rest."

Amy started to whisper anyway, and he leaned closer to hear her.

"Don't want to...live like this. Can't. Can't paint. Look ugly. Find someone else." Her eye closed again, and a single tear ran down her cheek.

"Don't say that." He gripped her hand. "I don't care what you look like. I love you for who you are. I'm not going to leave you, not ever."

Even as he said the words, he felt a momentary twinge of guilt, because the thought of leaving Amy had already crossed his mind. It wasn't fair that he'd have to spend the rest of his life with an invalid, more nursemaid than lover.

It killed him that he could have had such a thought, however brief. If their places were reversed, she'd never leave him.

Yes, she would. She cheated on you, remember?

Where the hell did that come from? He'd never caught her cheating on him, never even seen her look at another man, except when David Boreanaz was on TV. She had an inexplicable crush on the 'Bones' star.

JD took a deep breath. "I have to tell you what happened today." When Amy didn't respond, he kept talking. "I went to Ricky's. I had a gun. I was going to kill him."

Amy's eye opened again, turned towards him.

"I kept thinking how it's not fair that he should be walking around without a care in the world, while you're here like this because of him."

JD started crying as the rest of the story poured out of him.

"But I couldn't do it. I saw him, he was right there, but I couldn't pull the damn trigger! Amy, I'm so sorry. This is all my fault, I should have driven

you home that night, or walked you, and I should've had the balls to kill that sonuvabitch today."

"Glad you didn't," Amy whispered. "If you went to jail, who would take care of me and love me?"

"That's not the point," he sobbed, snuffling back mucus. "He nearly killed you, and I haven't done a thing about it. I'm no kind of man."

"Yes, you are. You saved me, twice. Once when you asked me out, and then on that road. That's because you're special, remember?" Amy's cracked, bruised lips formed a weak smile.

You're special.

Something about those words nagged at JD. She'd said them to him before.

Somewhere else. It was...

Not real.

This is Hell, not the real world. Amy was right. The devil didn't have any sins of my own to punish me for, so instead he tried to make me commit one.

He had no doubt that if he'd shot Ricky, or himself, in his dream, the results would have reverberated to the real world, and led to eternal damnation.

He bent down and kissed Amy's injured face.

"None of this matters, Amy, so don't worry. I love you, no matter what, and I'll accept what's happened if I have to. I don't care if you stop loving me, I'll never stop loving you."

He tilted his head up to face the ceiling.

"Hear that, asshole? Your tricks didn't work. You'll have to find another way to stop me."

The hospital room faded away, leaving JD alone in a stone cell. He walked over to the iron and wood door and found it unlocked.

Hang in there, Amy. I'm coming.

CHAPTER 17

The Proprietor opened his eyes in alarm.

That wasn't supposed to happen.

A cold, painful knot formed in his chest, the tiniest spark of wretched goodness burning through the veil of evil.

Out in the darkness, the carnival's zone of power stopped growing.

CHAPTER 18

Clifford

Cliff finished typing and leaned back. He'd just completed his last task, an email to Jenkins explaining the errors in both their formulas.

He sighed. Who would have believed the less than one percent difference between chimp and human genetic patterns would have such a profound effect on the action of...of the...

...of the what?

Cliff turned back to the screen, annoyed that he couldn't remember the words, and started scrolling through his notes.

I don't understand any of this.

A distant memory surfaced. Something about not being smart anymore. Something he'd done to himself.

I have to send this email before it's too late.

Cliff fumbled with the keys, but none of them triggered the send button.

"Stupid computer." He banged his fists on the keyboard.

New words appeared on the screen: File Deleted.

"No!"

Clifford swiped his hand across the table, knocking the keyboard and his notebook onto the floor. He kicked a chair, sent it crashing into a lab bench. A rack of test tubes fell over, spraying flammable liquids into a nearby electrical socket. A small explosion rocked the laboratory, showering the room with broken glass and triggering a shrill alarm.

"Fire! Help me."

Cliff opened the doors. The long hallway of Oxford's main science center, once as familiar as his own face, was now strange and confusing. He ran down the corridor until he stumbled upon the staircase and made his way outside.

"Mommy! Mommy!"

Under the purple twilight sky, Clifford sat down on the damp grass of the great lawn and started crying.

"I didn't mean to do it. I'm a good boy."

Inside the Primate Intelligence Laboratory, Clifford's computer and all the Nobel-worthy information contained in it melted into a puddle of plastic sludge as the fire claimed the building.

CHAPTER 19

Ricky

The sounds of sex changed to the roar of the crowd. Ricky opened his eyes and found himself back on the football field. The team stood huddled around him.

That was my private Hell? My girlfriend pulls a train in the locker room? I think I can deal until Saint Cole figures out how to save us.

He glanced up at the scoreboard. It was the second half, first set of downs, Whitebridge ball on the twenty-yard line.

And he knew what to do.

"Okay, here's the plan," Ricky said, taking a quick look at the defense. In the real world, this play resulted in a forty-yard gain; no reason to try something different. "Speedy, you'll..."

"You on your own, homey," MC interrupted.

"What?"

"Bite me," added Speedy, as he turned his back on Ricky.

The players walked away from the huddle, lining up in formation around the football. MC looked back at Ricky for a second, just long enough for Ricky to see the angry, blood-red eyes behind the helmet's face guard.

What the ...?

"Hey, man," he began, but at the sound of his voice the center snapped the ball. Instinct took over and Ricky caught it, and then tried to backpedal as MC and the rest of the offensive line stood aside and let the defense came charging through.

He managed two steps before a fifteen-hundred pound freight train of muscle, fat, and equipment hit him. Agony exploded in his right arm at the same time he heard a noise like ice breaking. A helmet battered his chest, knocking the air from his lungs and leaving him too breathless to scream.

More bodies piled on, slamming his head to the turf and pinning him to the ground. Then the weight lifted, and the booing of the crowd replaced the ringing in his ears. His lungs unfroze, and his chest heaved as he drew in a deep, grateful breath.

He pushed to his feet, every movement of his broken arm an exercise in agony. Players from both teams scrambled around, fighting for the loose ball, but it seemed to have a mind of its own and kept bouncing away.

Ricky started towards the sidelines, cradling his arm against his chest. Halfway there, a hush fell over the crowd.

He looked back in time to see the loose ball roll up against his feet. He didn't even have time to move before both teams converged on him.

Players hit him above and below the knees at the same time, bending the joints backwards. He screamed long and loud, and in the poised stillness his shrill cries echoed from one end of the stadium to the other. Even after the play ended, his howls of pain kept going until he saw MC's face looming over him.

He held his good arm up to his friend. "Help me. Get the doctor."

MC leaned down close, his bright red eyes glowing within the depths of his helmet. Foul-smelling strings of saliva dripped from a mouth crammed full of pointed teeth.

"Game over, Hollywood."

Suddenly, Amy stood over him, pointing at him. "He tried to rape me when we were going out."

Traci appeared. "He keeps gay porn in his closet."

JD stood there, laughing. "He was afraid to fight me."

Around the stadium, the crowd started to chant: "Loser! Loser!"

"No, this isn't fair. This isn't supposed to happen."

Speedy stared down at him. "You let Chantrelle die. Now it's your turn."

"Leave me alone. I need a doctor."

They attacked as one, kicking and beating him. MC brought his foot down on Ricky's left arm, snapping the elbow so hard that bones burst through the skin. Amy and Traci jumped on his legs, crushing his already-shattered knees.

Ricky cried out, and JD's loafer caught him in the mouth, sending shattered teeth down his throat.

Choking on blood and bone, he lay helpless as the faces around him drew closer, and the fang-filled mouths descended on him, blocking out all else.

In the darkness, there was only pain.

CHAPTER 20

Jeanne

"Lucy, I'm sorry, there's no way I can make that flight. I can't come until tonight. No, I can't go into it now, I'll be there as soon as I can. Make sure he knows that."

"He's your husband, Jeanne. What could be more important?" The cheap speaker of the cell phone couldn't mask the accusatory tone.

When Jeanne didn't answer, Boz's mother continued. "What kind of wife are you, anyway? Oh, you can bet I'll tell Billy. I'll tell him how you didn't feel you had to be there for him when he was dying. Don't bother coming at all, you bitch."

The connection went dead.

That's the first time I've ever heard Lucy swear. And she had every right to say it. I am *a bitch. Only a Class-A bitch would put her career ahead of her husband.*

"Jeanne, it's time for opening statements to begin."

Jeanne put away her cell phone and picked up her briefcase. She followed the senior partners into the courtroom, but all she could think about was what she'd say to Boz when she saw him.

From the moment they sat down and the partners began asking her for information, she knew she'd screwed up. First, her laptop froze and she couldn't get into the database. Then the papers she needed weren't in her file. She had to rely on memory, and twice she gave Hollister mixed up facts and then had to correct herself. She dropped papers on the floor, causing the judge to interrupt the DA's monologue and ask if everything was all right.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" Hollister whispered. "Are you trying to fuck us over?"

"I'm sorry. I can't think straight. I'm too worried about Billy."

"Well, if you want to make it in this firm, you'd better learn to get your priorities in line. When you get back from Florida, we're going to have a long talk. If you're lucky, we'll keep you on as a law clerk."

As soon as the noon break came, she shoved everything into Karen's hands and ran out of the courthouse. Twenty minutes to the airport, three hours to Miami.

Boz, please hang in there.

When Jeanne arrived in the ICU ward, Boz's mother was standing there, crying. A man in bloody scrubs and a lab coat had a comforting arm around

her shoulders.

"I got here as soon as I could." Jeanne clutched at Lucy's sleeve. "Is he all right?"

"Are you the wife?" the doctor asked. At Jeanne's nod he continued. "I'm sorry, but your husband didn't make it. He expired on the operating table about ten minutes ago. There were internal injuries as well as the spinal damage, and we couldn't stop the bleeding. We used up our entire supply of O-negative. If we'd only had one or two more pints, there might have been enough time to close up all the ruptured vessels."

"O-negative? That's my blood type." Jeanne sank into one of the waiting room chairs.

"If you'd been here last night, my son would be alive now," Mrs. Zymansky said, her voice cold and hard. "He asked for you, you know. Wanted to know why you weren't here."

"I couldn't," Jeanne muttered. "If I'd left, my career would have been over, I'd have never been able to practice law." Even to her own ears it sounded wrong.

"Here." Boz's mother pulled a gun from her purse. "Do us all a favor. Use this. The world will be better off without another greedy lawyer, and I'll do a better job raising your kids than you ever could."

Jeanne stared at the gun in her hand as the room emptied out around her.

She's right.

Slowly she raised the gun to her head.

CHAPTER 21

Chris

Chris dropped his books to the floor and fell back on his bed.

Every single midterm. How could I fail every single midterm? Even Music Appreciation. The football players laugh at that class.

My parents are gonna kill me.

This is all DeShane's fault. If she hadn't messed with my head, I would've been able to study and this wouldn't have happened.

The worst had been Media and Film, the one class he actually cared about. He'd worked hard on his project, and Mr. Klein had laughed at it. It had been a documentary that debunked the myths about marijuana use, showing how smokers could function perfectly well in society.

He'd followed Dave around for three days, recording how he smoked his brains out and still received top grades in every class. But Klein had said it was like watching three stoners playing with their first camcorder. The whole class had laughed. Klein had hated it so much he hadn't even given it a grade, just written "Give it up," in bold letters across the DVD case.

Chris grabbed a joint from the box under his bed and fired up as he checked his answering machine. The light blinked in a stuttering fashion, indicating multiple messages. He hit the play button as he inhaled the sharp, acrid smoke of the fine Colombian.

BEEP "Hey, dude, it's Dave. Freakin'-A, I got into MIT. Can you believe it? I just got the letter today. Come on over, we're havin' the party to end all parties tonight."

BEEP "Chris, it's Zach. Listen, I wanted you to hear this from me before anyone else. I'm going into rehab. I promised Sharon I'd go straight once we graduated, and I can't do it myself. That means I won't be able to hang out with you guys anymore, I need to be around people who don't drink or smoke. Uh, by the way, DeShane's dating Sharon's older brother. I figured you ought to hear it from me. Sorry, bro. See you around."

BEEP "Dude, it's Weemers. Can't talk long. I think the cops have my phone tapped, so, like, they might know I been selling dope to you. Don't come over here for awhile. My little book's gone, too, the one I kept everyone's name in. Shit, maybe I should have called you from a payphone. Gotta go."

BEEP "Chris, it's DeShane. I heard you failed your film project. I told you to pick another topic. You're nothing but a piece of crap, you know that? Have a fun life flipping burgers."

Before the line went dead, a male voice in the background laughed and

told her to get back in bed.

The machine gave a soft click as it reset itself.

This has been the worst day of my whole life. Maybe they're right. Maybe I am a total loser.

He stubbed out the roach on the top of the desk. Right next to his hand was a gun.

How'd that get here?

You know what to do with it, DeShane's voice told him.

Yes. Yes he did.

He picked it up and placed it against his temple.

CHAPTER 22

Neil

Neil walked down Lakeview Drive. The years fell away as he returned to the after-school routine of his youth. Five steps up to the front door. By the third one, his lungs felt like they were on fire and his heart banged in his chest like a father trying to get his teenage daughter out of the bathroom.

What's wrong with me? Even as a kid I wasn't so out of shape that I couldn't make it up the steps.

At the top, he leaned forward to open the storm door and caught a glimpse of his reflection in the glass. The balding stranger looking back at him carried four hundred pounds of flab stuffed inside a green khaki shirt and pants, just like the Dickies his grandfather wore to work. The pudgy face was flush and sweating.

The familiar, delicious smells of his mother's cooking greeted him when he opened the door.

"Is that you, Neil?"

She came out of the kitchen, apron on, stirring a pot of her famous mac and cheese. She'd aged as much as he had. Chubby and rosy-cheeked when she was in her forties, now she looked old and worn out. Chubby was a distant memory. While nowhere near Neil's present size, she definitely did her shopping in the plus-size departments.

"I'm making your favorite, dear. Macaroni with extra cheese, and bacon sandwiches. And for dessert there's chocolate cake."

"Ma, what's going on? Why am I different?"

"Different? Different how?" She touched a hand to his forehead. "Are you feeling well? Did something happen at the university today?"

"University? You mean I'm teaching at the university?" It wasn't quite what he'd intended for his life, but all in all, it wasn't that bad, either.

"Teaching? Oh, goodness, you're always putting me on, aren't you? Well, not unless they're letting janitors teach the classes now." She turned away, heading back into the kitchen.

"I'm a janitor?" Neil shouted at her back. "How could that happen? I'm too smart to be a janitor."

"Now, don't you start that again," Ma Jarvis pointed her spoon at him. A glob of cheese fell to the floor. "You're lucky your father, God rest his soul, was able to get you a job at all. He had to pull a lot of strings at the university to get you in."

She turned down the flame and scooped macaroni into a bowl.

"It took all our money to keep you out of jail after you got caught putting

those poison mushrooms into Robby Avalon's lunch. I don't know what they did to you up in that mental home, but when you came back to us you had all these silly notions in your head. How you were going to be a big, famous scientist. Why, it took you three tries to get your GED."

She set down a platter of sandwiches. "Now you've almost got your twenty years in, and you're starting this nonsense again? Put it out of your mind, boy. Now, come and eat."

Neil leaned against the doorframe.

A janitor?

A cloudy memory of being strapped to a table in a white room, a rubber stopper in his mouth, floated up from his subconscious.

Electroshock therapy? They fried my brain? And now everyone thinks I'm stupid. Or, maybe I was, but now the smart Neil is inhabiting the dumb Neil's body. So, all I've got to do is go to the university in the morning, take some IQ tests, and prove to everyone I'm not an idiot.

Neil sat down at the table and forked thick macaroni and cheese into his plate before helping himself to a bacon sandwich. He started eating, turning over his problem in his mind.

Once I prove my intelligence, then what? I'm middle-aged with no education. I'll have to get a quick degree.

As he reached for his second sandwich, a sharp, shooting pain arced from his chest down to his left hand and the entire arm grew heavy and numb.

Oh, no, it can't be.

Another hammer blow struck his chest, and he dropped his fork.

As he fell to the floor, unable to breathe, a picture formed in his head, a picture of girl.

He didn't know her, but he knew that he loved her.

Josie.

CHAPTER 23

Fred

Freddy kicked open the classroom door. The huge grin on his face felt like it would keep going until it split his skin and stretched around his head.

"Hi-ho, hi-ho, it's off to kill I go."

JD turned away from the blackboard. "Freddy? What's going on?"

"Enough's enough, I can't takes me no more."

A small part of him was appalled at what he was about to do, but the dark voice in his head kept digging its nails into his brain, telling him *'go ahead, it will make all the pain go away.'*

He swung the hunting rifle around and fired from the waist. The slug took his old friend in the right shoulder and spun him back and around, a drunken ballet dance that ended with JD on the floor and splatters of blood on the blackboard.

Behind them, panic and screams ensued as the freshman English class scrambled over desks and each other, trying to get as far to the back of the room as possible.

"That's for ruining my life." Fred poked JD with the gun. "Today's the day you go away. Have to kill you. Already killed my wife and kids. Then I went to your house and shot Amy. Plastered her brains all over a canvas. Might be her best work. Hope I get some credit. That just leaves you."

"Amy? You killed Amy?" Blood dribbled from JD's mouth, and his voice was a weak ghost of its smug former self.

Look at him on the ground, where he belongs. Now *who's the king?*

"Killed her? I *destroyed* her," Fred laughed. "Then I banged the shit out of her. But don't you worry. You'll be joining her real soon."

Fred fired a round into JD's stomach. The bullet tore through flesh and buried itself deep in the floor. JD gasped and spat up blood and stomach fluids.

Just for shits and giggles, Freddy fired four shots into the mass of students crowded at the back of the room. He heard more screams, didn't know if he hit or killed anyone, didn't care. Good fun, baby.

"Yessir, I have to say this has been one fine day. Once you're dead, I'll be able to start all over, make a real nice life for myself this time. How's that?"

Outside, the first sirens became audible.

"Oops, better end this fast, JD old pal." Fred reloaded and put another shot into JD, blowing his head apart like a tomato. The crimson explosion splattered a porridge of brain, bone, and blood across the floor and walls.

Freddy roared with laughter, and then emptied the rest of the clip into the

mass of students cowering across the room. Once he finished, he moved to the window. Eight police cars had pulled up, the officers already ducked down behind their open car doors, guns aimed at the school.

"I'm free! I'm finally free." Freddy shook his rifle at them through the window. "Come and get..."

The sharpshooter's high velocity bullet entered Freddy's skull just above the left eye, passing through so quickly that it left an exit hole hardly larger than a quarter.

Freddy tumbled over in mid-sentence, unaware he'd already died.

CHAPTER 24

Boz

I can't take it anymore.

Boz sat in his living room, a warm beer forgotten in his hand, a generic game show playing on the old TV. Since getting out of jail all he'd been doing was watching television, drinking, and thinking about what could have been.

He'd tried working around the farm but his heart wasn't in it. Last month his mother had passed away, following Boz's father after five lonely years. Since then everything had gone to hell. He'd fired the last two farmhands, sold off the few remaining hogs, sold all the farm equipment after that.

Thanks to life insurance, he had enough money in the bank to pay the mortgage and not have to work for five, maybe six years, if he was frugal. After that, who the hell cared?

He crumpled the beer can in his fist, suds and backwash spraying out the top, and tossed it into a corner.

Boz reached down to grab another beer and instead found a double-barreled pump-action, his father's rusty old rabbit gun.

This ought to be locked up in the gun close. I'll put it back. Have to get another beer anyway.

He was halfway down the hall when the doorbell rang. He turned, steadied himself with one hand against the wall, and returned to the living room. Opening the door, he found JD Cole standing on the porch.

"Hey, Boz. I've been meaning to come see how you were doing. I was really sorry to hear about your mother."

JD smiled, his false teeth yet another reminder to Boz of his failed life.

"The other reason I wanted to come by is to let you know Amy and I are getting married, and we want you to come to the wedding. No hard feelings, right? So, whatcha say? We cool?"

Boz brought the gun up to his shoulder, enjoying the way the stupid smile disappeared from JD's mouth. Boz pulled both triggers, anticipating JD's head spraying across the front yard.

Instead, he heard the *click-click* of the triggers.

JD opened his eyes, then started to laugh.

"You stupid pig farmer. You can't do anything right."

Boz dropped the gun. "I'll kill you for what you did to me!"

He grabbed JD's neck and squeezed as hard as he could.

CHAPTER 25

The Proprietor raised his hands into the air, arms spread and palms up.

Marvelous.

Hatred, anger, fear, guilt—every negative emotion possible—flowed into him, gathered and funneled through the Castle of Horrors.

Fear and uncertainty washed away on the stupendous wave of black energy. The Proprietor opened his mouth, wider and wider, until his entire face disappeared, leaving nothing behind but black hole.

He regurgitated the dark malevolence in a vomitus of pure evil that spread out to his minions, who in turn grew in strength.

Once more, the carnival's zone of foul metaphysical radiation pushed outwards.

CHAPTER 26

JD

JD met no resistance on his way back to the demon king's chambers. Entering as quietly as possible, he looked around for the guards, but they were gone.

And something far worse in their place.

The beast attacking Amy was a horrible parody of a sea creature, with thick, slimy tentacles that ended in mouths filled with razor-sharp teeth. Leather straps held Amy in place on a wooden cross, while the enormous demon bit and struck her with its grotesque appendages.

Cuts and bite marks covered her arms and legs, showing where the monster had already helped itself to her flesh. One of her eyes was swollen and blackened, and reddish, blistered imprints in the shape of oversized hands marred her exposed flesh beneath the tatters of her clothing.

JD's mind went numb. "Amy..." Then a blinding rage overwhelmed him and he sprinted across the room, praying he wasn't too late.

He leaped onto the demon's mucus-covered back, digging the fingers of one hand into the slime-coated flesh to hold himself in place. With his other hand, he plunged his knife into one of the demon's three eyes. The orb burst with a low popping sound and JD's hand and arm followed the knife deep into the hot pudding of the creature's brain.

The demon let loose a high-pitched yowl and fell backwards, whipping its tentacles around as it thrashed across the chamber. JD hung on, twisting the knife inside the monster's head.

The squid-demon jerked to a halt, stiffened, and then collapsed. JD withdrew his slime-covered arm, unmindful of the swamp-water smell rising from it. He hurried back to Amy and touched a hand to her cheek.

"Amy. Can you hear me?"

"Knew you'd save me," she whispered, her face contorted with pain.

"It's gonna be okay." He touched her wrist and she flinched.

"My...hand."

"Oh, Jesus."

He wanted to scream, to cry, to kill someone. All the fingers on Amy's right hand – *her painting hand* – stuck out at crooked angles, swollen and already turning purplish-blue.

"This is gonna hurt."

"Do it." She closed her eyes, clenched her jaw, and turned her head away.

He tried to hold her mutilated hands steady as he cut the straps with the silver knife, but every movement brought more moans of pain from her.

"I'm sorry."

He supported her weight against his chest as he lowered her down. As soon as her feet touched the floor, she fell to her knees and vomited, her body convulsing in wracking spasms.

JD held her until she finished. "We've got to get out of here. Can you walk, or should I carry you?"

"No, I'd only slow you down. Go save the others, have to, so we can all go home."

"I'll go get Boz first, then he can protect you while I rescue the others."

Amy shook her head. "No, Traci first. Hurry."

"Amy, she was almost dead before this sick game even started. Besides, I should start with the people who deserve to be saved."

"That's how they want you to think. Selfish. Save her first because she's closest and in the most trouble. Then get the others."

She's right. Again.

He lifted her head and kissed the unbruised side of her face, ignoring the puke and slime.

"I love you, Amy."

"Love you too. Be careful." Amy leaned against the wall and closed her eyes.

"I will."

JD headed for the room behind the throne, where he found Traci's unconscious form still hanging from the metal X. Bloody welts covered her body, and there were several large bite marks as well.

She's gonna need a lot of stitches, and some plastic surgery, too. If she lives.

He untied her straps and carried her back to the outer room, laid her down next to Amy.

"Amy, take this in case the demons come back." He pressed the derringer into her left hand. "Don't use it unless they're close, and then aim for the eyes."

Amy didn't answer, but she gripped the gun and nodded.

JD returned to the hallway. The first two doors he tried opened into empty rooms, but he hit paydirt on his third try.

Jeanne sat in the middle of the stone chamber, pointing her finger towards her mouth like someone miming a suicide. Remembering the gun in his own visions, JD grabbed her hand and aimed it towards the ceiling just as she moved her thumb and yelled "Bang!"

He pushed her to the floor and pinned her arm down with one knee. She struggled under him, thrashing her body back and forth.

"Leave me alone! It's all my fault, I should have been there."

"Jeanne. Wake up, it's not real." He slapped her face, once, twice. Her

eyes snapped open, and she focused on JD.

"JD? What are you doing here? Oh, my god, JD, I let him die, Boz is dead because I wasn't there for him."

She started crying, and JD shook her.

"Jeanne, listen to me. It was all an illusion. Remember? Boz and the others are still alive, but we've got to save them."

Jeanne wiped her eyes and took a deep breath.

"That bastard. JD, he made me live out my worse nightmare, that I let Boz die because I was selfish."

"They tried it with me, too. Probably everyone's going through something like that. But we can stop it. I'm gonna take you back to Amy and Traci so you can keep an eye on them while I look for the others."

JD led Jeanne to Satan's throne room. "Take care of her," he said, staring down at Amy's unconscious form.

"Like she was my sister," Jeanne promised.

JD returned to his search. In the next room down from Jeanne's, JD found Boz in the center of the chamber, facing the door, arms extended as if holding a rifle.

"Click, Click," Boz said.

"Boz? It's me, JD. Wake up. C'mon, I need your help."

Scowling and red-faced, Boz grabbed him by the throat and forced him to the ground. JD knocked his hands away, but Boz threw a flurry of punches, too fast and hard for JD to block them all. Instead, he had to lash out with one foot, kicking his heavier opponent in the ribs.

JD winced at the sound of bone breaking.

I hope he doesn't remember this when he wakes up.

Boz fell to one side and JD used the chance to scuttle backwards and get to his knees.

"Boz, stop."

The football player rushed him again, grabbing him around the neck again and picking him up off the ground, choking him while he hung there. JD slapped his hands against Boz's ears and Boz let go.

JD managed to land on his feet, and before Boz could throw another punch, JD hit him as hard as he could, in the space below the breastbone. Boz doubled over, gasping for breath, giving JD a chance to stumble to the other side of the room.

Shaking his head like a rabid dog, Boz glared at him and prepared to charge again.

Gotta break this spell before he kills me.

"Boz, Jeanne is in trouble. You have to help Jeanne."

Hearing his girlfriend's name seemed to do the trick. The anger drained from Boz's face and he stood up, relaxing from his fighting stance.

"What about Jeanne? Oh, damn, JD, they tried to make me kill you." Boz staggered back and leaned against the wall, a shamed expression on his face.

"Yeah, but you didn't. Let's go. I left Jeanne with Amy and Traci. She's okay, they messed with her head too, but physically she's fine. Amy's hurt real bad, though, and Traci's almost dead. We need to find the others and then get out of here, get the girls to a doctor as fast as we can."

"Lead the way. Man, that must have been some illusion they sent me to. I feel like I broke my ribs," Boz said, holding his side as they left the room.

"Yeah, about that..."

Inside the next room, Neil lay on the floor, his face blue and his tongue hanging out. JD rushed over to the prone figure.

"Do you know CPR?" he asked Boz, as he felt for a pulse.

"No, but Jeanne does. Let's bring him back." Boz bent down and picked Neil up. Grimacing, he hoisted the limp form onto his shoulder.

Halfway back to the demon king's chamber, they heard the gunshot.

"Amy! I left the derringer with her."

"Go on," Boz said. "I'll catch up."

Amy lay on the ground, a puddle of blood under the back of her head. Jeanne stood over her, the smoking derringer in her hand, a bruise forming on her cheek.

JD's heart slammed in his chest, then he saw Traci lying crumpled against the base of the throne, a bleeding hole in the center of her chest.

Jeanne dropped the gun and looked at JD. Blood dribbled from her swollen lower lip.

"She...she woke up and attacked us," Jeanne said. "I didn't expect her to be so strong, not in her condition. She punched me and knocked me down, and then she grabbed Amy and started to...to bang her head on the ground. I picked up the gun and shot her. I had to. She was gonna kill Amy. Oh, god, I killed Traci."

"You did what you had to do," Boz said as he entered the room. He set Neil down while JD checked Amy. "Help me with Neil, it looks like he had a heart attack or something."

Jeanne knelt and began giving Neil mouth-to-mouth.

"How's Amy?" Boz asked.

JD looked up. "Not good. I think she has a concussion. There's a lump on the back of her head, and her pulse is weak." He grasped Amy's hand. "C'mon, Ames, hang in there, you can do it. Don't leave me now."

"JD, we've got to get the others."

"No. I left her twice already, and she's been hurt both times. I won't do it again."

"JD, you have to." Jeanne looked up at him. "Amy said so herself, while you were gone. She told me only you can wake the others from their dreams, that's your gift, your power. I'll watch her. I've got the gun. Now hurry, go, and then get back here so we can all go home."

"What about Neil?" Boz asked.

Jeanne shook her head. "It was too late."

"I hate this place." JD pounded his fists against the floor. He looked at Amy, laying helpless and injured.

I can't let her down.

He stood up. "Fine. Let's go, Boz. I want to do this as fast as we can. I'm not leaving her alone a second more than I have to." JD walked out of the room, not waiting to see if Boz followed or not.

They found Chris next, his body stiff and cold on the stone floor. Dried blood had pooled around the remains of his head. After that came Freddy, his condition even worse. When he saw his friend's lifeless body, JD fell to his knees, crying.

"This isn't right. We're not saving anyone," he sobbed. "He was my best friend. Goddamn bastards, they killed him."

"Maybe they're not all dead," Boz said. "I'll check the next room."

JD said a silent prayer over Freddy's body, ending with a whispered "I'm sorry." He went out into the hallway and found Boz coming down the hall, Ricky's body held in his massive arms.

"He's alive, but barely," Boz said.

JD found that hard to believe. Ricky looked like he'd been run over by a truck. One leg was twisted at an unnatural angle. His left eye was gone, the black socket still leaking blood and fluids. A piece of jagged bone stuck out of his arm. Bruises covered every inch of exposed skin, and most of his teeth were gone.

"Take him back with the others," JD told him. "I'll find Cliff."

JD tried four rooms before he found Cliff. The science student stood in a corner, talking to himself.

"Cliff! Thank god you're all right. C'mon, we've got to get out of here."

The science student kept talking to himself, and JD went over to him. "Cliff?"

"Mary had a little lamb, little lamb, little lamb..."

"Cliff, can you hear me?" He touched Cliff on the shoulder.

The once happy face turned towards him, tears running down his cheeks, his eyes wide and frightened. "Can you help me find my mommy? I'm lost."

"Sure, Cliff. Come with me. You're safe now."

Taking him by the hand, JD led him back to the demon king's chamber.

Goddamn this carnival. Goddamn them all.

Back in the demon king's chamber, JD stood in front of the throne and shouted out for Satan. "It's over. We beat your game. Now let us go."

With a flash of light and the nauseating smell of burning sulfur, Satan appeared before them. One clawed foot kicked Traci's corpse away from the bottom of the chair as he climbed into his throne.

"Well done, Mister Cole." The devil's gravelly laugh filled the room. "It seems I underestimated you. But no matter. After all, none of you will ever leave this place."

"What? You can't do that. You made an agreement with us," Boz yelled.

"An agreement? Oh, dear boy, did you forget where you were? This is Hell. You must learn to listen carefully and read the fine print. I distinctly said you would have the chance to save each other. I never said you could leave."

He pointed at JD. "I must congratulate you. No one has ever managed to save themselves, let alone anyone else. So in your honor I have prepared something special for you and your friends.

"Instead of sentencing you to an eternity of pain and suffering, you will spend the next several thousand years together. The conditions will not be good, but you will have something the other souls here do not: the companionship of your friends and loved ones."

JD stepped forward. "No. You failed to stop us. Like you said, we're not the usual souls that end up here, and we're not subject to your rules."

Satan stood up. "I am the King of Hell. You cannot defy me."

"We can, and we do. In fact, we do more than that. We reject you. We're living beings who can choose how to live their lives. We still have the chance to make things right for ourselves, so that someday our souls end up somewhere other than Hell."

JD smiled, a feeling of pure surety forming inside him.

"You can't even kill us, or you would have done it already. All you can do is trick us into doing it ourselves, and it's too late for than now. Now step aside, asshole, we're leaving."

"I cannot kill you, but I can deliver great pain." Satan flexed his claws and poison dripped down from their tips, burning like acid where it hit the stone floor. "When I'm done with you, you'll beg for death."

JD pulled the silver knife from his belt and held it out. The demon roared and charged forward. JD ducked to one side, the deadly claws passing by so close he felt the breeze. He lashed out with his knife, catching the demon across the arm.

With a harsh laugh, Satan slapped the knife away, sending it across the room and breaking one of JD's fingers in the process.

"Fool! You think me a lesser demon? Silver can't harm me. I am Lucifer the Eternal."

One scaly hand flicked out, leaving two light scratches across the skin of JD's arm. Burning agony spread from the cuts to all parts of JD's body, so intense that his knees buckled and he fell to the floor.

"Yes, feel my poison, human. A few more drops and you'll be paralyzed with pain, unable to move as I slowly tear piece after piece from your body. You'll spend the rest of your natural life in agony, until you can't take it any longer and you'll do anything for death, even if it means killing yourself or your own lover. And then your soul will finally belong to me."

Lucifer moved forward, his scaly paw held out, one claw extended. JD watched it move closer and closer to his face, knowing he'd failed Amy, failed all of them.

I'm so sorry.

He closed his eyes.

CHAPTER 27

Jeanne

Cliff raised his arm, and at first Jeanne thought he was pointing. It wasn't until she saw the glint of metal in his hand that she realized he'd picked up the gun from where she'd left it next to Amy's body.

Satan's roaring laughter drowned out the sound of the derringer firing. The taloned hand stopped in midreach and reversed direction, moving upwards to its owner's chest, where it joined its partner in trying to hold back the thick, black blood dripping from the tiny hole that had suddenly appeared there.

The demon king stumbled away from JD's body. A red light began to glow between his fingers, streaming out in all directions.

"Nooo!"

The gargantuan body started to shrink, growing smaller as the light grew brighter. Soon it was only a fraction of its previous size and completely encased in blinding, ruby-colored light.

Then everything went dark.

CHAPTER 28

"Nooo!" The Proprietor cried, as cold, ruby-red fire consumed his body. Across the carnival, his minions screamed in pain and exploded into scarlet fireworks.

A circle of darkness formed in the center of the Midway. Tents, games, rides and booths slid towards it and fell into the inky sphere. Everything trapped within the carnival's fading ring of power followed—cars, people, and animals all consumed by the growing black circle.

Last to go were the trailers and trucks at the carnival's periphery. As the final one disappeared, the sphere shrank to a pinpoint of black and then vanished in an implosion of supernatural energies that echoed across the distant hills, louder than any jet breaking the sound barrier.

In the silence that followed, only a dirt field remained where the carnival had been.

Six people huddled in its center.

CHAPTER 29

JD

Frigid air burned against JD's skin, and he opened his eyes to the black, starry dome of the night sky. Hard-packed ground and dead grass chilled his back.

"What the hell happened?" he asked.

"Bang, bang," Cliff said, waving the derringer in the air. "Clifford not like bad monster. Clifford do bang-bang."

"Are we home?" Jeanne asked.

"I think so," JD said.

"Clifford done good?" He tugged at Jeanne's sleeve.

"Clifford did very good," she told him, taking the gun from his hand. "Clifford made the bad monster go away."

JD stood up, his muscles screaming as he removed what was left of his shirt and wrapped it around Amy's naked form. After the intense heat of Hell, the cold October air already had them shivering. Boz gave JD his shirt to help cover her up, and then picked up Ricky's body. JD did the same with Amy.

"I guess we should head for the road and hope someone picks us up. Can you guys make it?" Boz asked.

"We've come too far not to," Jeanne said, taking Clifford's hand.

"No, I've got a better idea." JD pointed across the field. "There's a house that way, the guy who owns this farm. We can use his phone to call 911."

Dan McCready's house was empty when they got there, but the phone still worked.

"What are we going to tell the police?" Boz asked as they waited for the ambulance.

Jeanne thought for a moment, then answered him. "We say that we were in the Castle of Horrors, we smelled something funny, and then blacked out. The next thing we knew, we woke up in the field, and the carnival was gone. If we try to tell anybody the truth, they'll lock us away forever."

JD started to say something, but just then Amy moaned and opened her eyes. Leaning over her, JD whispered, "Hang in there, Ames, we made it. We're going to get you to a hospital."

"Knew you could do it," she said, her voice barely audible.

"I couldn't have done it without you," he told her. "Now just stay with me a little longer."

"Love you," she said.

"I love you, too."

Her eyes closed again and her head lolled to the side.

"Ames? Amy, say something. Talk to me."

He placed his hand on her chest. "I don't think she's breathing."

"We need to do CPR." Jeanne pushed him aside. "Give me some room."

"Oh, God, Jeanne, please keep her alive," JD prayed, as Jeanne began breathing into Amy's mouth.

Please, please, don't let her die now. I can't go on without her.

CHAPTER 30

One year later

"JD, can you get the door? I'm not dressed yet."

JD hit the save key and rolled his chair away from the desk. He crossed the living room area of their small studio apartment and opened the door.

"Hi, guys, c'mon in," he said, stepping aside so Boz and Jeanne could enter.

Jeanne gave him a kiss, and Boz shook his hand.

"Good to see you," JD said.

"Yeah, sorry we haven't driven down more often, but with classes and football...you know how it is."

Amy entered the room just then, distracting JD from the conversation. Even in a pair of faded jeans and a simple red sweater, she was stunning.

"Hey, you two." She gave Jeanne big hug, and then planted a kiss on Boz that made him blush. "How's things in Indianapolis?"

"School's tough, but I like it," Jeanne said as they sat down on the oversized couch. Laid out on the coffee table were the snacks Amy and JD had prepared earlier. "And the coach told Boz he's starting next week."

"That's great." JD gave him a slap on the back. "That's the game against Northern Kentucky, right? Big game. How come you're not stuck practicing?"

"Coach gave us tomorrow off." Boz made a tiny sandwich out of cheese and crackers. "I actually brought you guys a couple of free tickets, good seats, right behind our bench. Hope you can make it, and dinner afterwards. Our treat."

"We wouldn't miss it," JD said, heading into the kitchen to get drinks for everyone.

"How are you guys doing?" Jeanne asked.

"JD's book just got picked up by a publishing house," Amy answered, "They really liked it, even gave him a decent advance, which is supposed to be a big deal, I guess, for a first novel."

"It is, trust me," JD commented, coming in with four beers. "Makes up for all those late nights I spend at the computer."

He sat down next to Amy.

"I still feel strange writing about what happened to us. It's like I'm cashing in on the deaths of so many people. I don't know if it was the right thing to do."

"You can't feel that way, JD," Jeanne told him. "None of us would be here if it wasn't for you, and who knows what would have happened to

Whitebridge if you hadn't saved us."

"We all played a part. You're the one who kept Amy alive until the ambulance came."

"How about a toast to the ones we lost," Amy said, lifting her bottle. Everyone touched rims.

For a moment, no one said anything, just sipped beer or chewed their food.

"So, have you been keeping track of the others?" JD finally asked.

"Yeah," Boz responded. "Clifford is still the same. His parents have him in a special home. We sent him a Christmas card last year, and his parents called to say thank you."

"Us too," Amy said. "What about Ricky?"

Boz sighed. "I went to see him a couple of weeks ago. He's off the respirator, and the doctors say he'll probably be walking again in six months. But he'll always need a cane. His right arm just kind of hangs there. He was talking about suicide. The doctors have him on antidepressants, but even so, all he does is cry most of the time."

Silence again. JD began to think their one-year anniversary party wasn't such a good idea after all.

Jeanne broke the quiet with a happy shout. "Oh, Amy, I just noticed. You're painting again."

"The doctors gave me the all clear a month ago. I've finished four pieces. I'd have done more, but my hand still gets tired easily. I wanted some new ones to go with my old work, because I have my first show in December."

"Oh, that's great." The two women walked into the other room, talking animatedly.

JD turned to Boz. "Good to see them friends again, that's the one good thing to come out of all this."

He lowered his voice so the girls wouldn't hear. "I know it's helped Amy, having another girl to talk to. Some of the stuff she went through, well, she doesn't like talking to me about it."

"Yeah, it's been great for Jeanne, too. She was always torn up when they weren't getting along. Me, at least I can let my anger out on the field. What do you do?"

"Judo. Three nights a week. It's good for me, and it gets me out of the apartment so Amy can paint, or just be alone." He picked up his beer and took a sip. "I'm gonna ask her to marry me."

"She'll say yes," Boz told him.

"I know. She keeps dropping hints that she's ready, but I'm still kinda nervous. Her parents think we're way too young."

"Hell, Jeanne's parents blew a gasket when we moved in together," Boz laughed. JD joined him.

"You know what?" Boz made another cheddar and Triscuit sandwich. "Sometimes I don't believe it even happened, and other times I can't believe it isn't still going on."

"I know. I don't think it's really over, not for good. I mean, if that was Hell, we couldn't have destroyed it. But maybe we did enough damage to keep it from coming back, at least for a while."

"Is that what happens in your book?" Boz asked him.

"Yep. Just a temporary reprieve in the war between good and evil, a war that will never end. I..." He paused as Amy and Jeanne came back into the room.

"Oh, you guys look way too serious," Amy said, a mock scowl on her face. "C'mon, let's eat dinner. I made lasagna."

JD grabbed his beer and followed the others to the table.

We'll never know the truth. But maybe that's okay. Maybe it's enough to know our part in the war is over.

EPILOGUE

Muskogee, South Dakota

Three boys on their way to Muskogee High School stopped to look at a flyer stapled to a telephone pole.

"Hey, check it out," one of them said, tearing the flyer down. "There's a Halloween carnival coming to town tomorrow, one night only."

"Way cool!" replied one of the others. "We gotta tell everyone. This is gonna be killer!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JG Faherty grew up—and still lives—in a small NY state town filled with Revolutionary War graveyards and battle sites, haunted roads, and purported Bigfoot sightings, all of which definitely influenced his writing. A lifelong fan of horror and science fiction, as a young boy he cut his teeth on everything from The Hardy Boys, Dracula, and Star Trek to textbooks on herpetology and paleontology. His varied professional career includes working as a resume writer, laboratory manager, accident scene photographer, zoo keeper, research scientist, and salesman. Since he began writing in 2001, his short stories, poetry, and non-fiction have appeared in numerous magazines, e-zines, and anthologies. If you see him at a convention or book signing, feel free to buy him a Guinness.

For more information, visit jgfaherty.com or email jg@jgfaherty.com

ALSO FROM
GRAVESIDE TALES

THE BEAST WITHIN, edited by Matt Hults: $16.95



Grab a silver bullet and prepare yourself for 20 tales of animalistic terror crafted by authors from around the world. Travel across the ages and go beyond the myth to discover the horrific secrets of the werebeasts. From ancient cultures to the high-tech future, nowhere is safe from the shape-shifting bloodlust of The Beast Within

.

Purchasable at GravesideBooks.com

ALSO FROM
GRAVESIDE TALES

HAWG by Steven Shrewsbury: $14.95

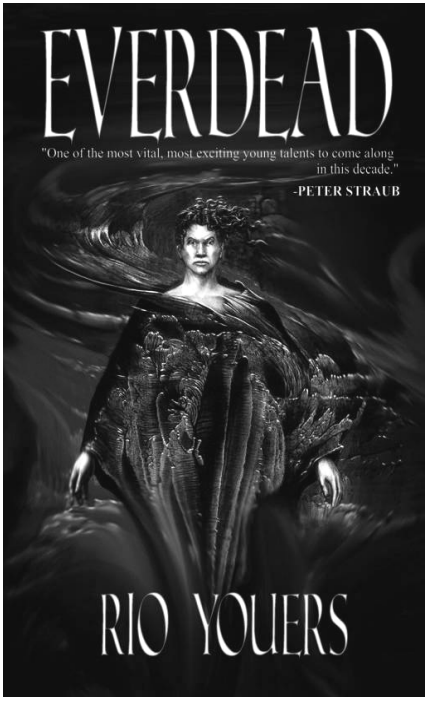


Blue collar tough Andrew White knows that in the rural community of Miller's Fork bad things are best left in the dark. He soon learns that monsters wear many shapes. In a populace rife with of vice and deception, something has broken loose … something hidden and feral.

Purchasable at GravesideBooks.com

ALSO FROM
GRAVESIDE TALES

EVERDEAD by Rio Youers: $14.95



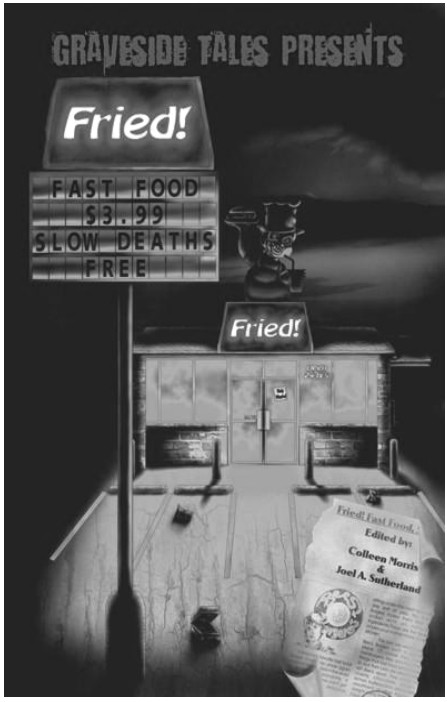
Toby Matthews has come to San Antonio to recover from a broken heart, and it seems that beautiful Cass Tait may be the cure. But as their relationship begins to bloom, they stumble upon an unspeakable darkness. They stare evil in the eye, they see its true heart, and know that only they can stop it. Before the sun goes down, they must decide whether to run …or whether to stand like heroes and fight.

Purchasable at GravesideBooks.com

ALSO FROM
GRAVESIDE TALES

FRIED! FAST FOOD, SLOW DEATHS:

Edited by Colleen Morris and Joel A. Sutherland $14.95



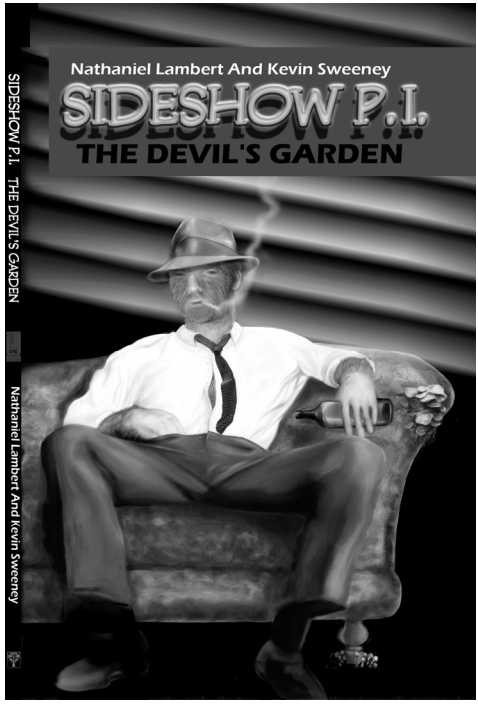
23 stories of monsters, maniacs, murderers and milkshakes. Devour the tale of a band of hobos who crave human flesh. Chow down on the myth of an abandoned restaurant that serves as a gateway for lost and demented souls. Gorge yourself on the story of the veggie burger that turns human beings into human beans. Pig out on the account of the fast food joint that stands as humanity's last hope for survival in a zombie-infested world.

Purchasable at GravesideBooks.com

ALSO FROM
GRAVESIDE TALES

SIDESHOW P.I.: THE DEVIL'S GARDEN,

By Nathaniel Lambert and Kevin Sweeney: $12.95



New Ramoth. A city covered in scar tissue, where survival of the fittest decides who's on top and crime is the only promotion system. Enter Eddie "Dog Boy" Gnash, ex-carnival freak turned private investigator. Now the bodies are piling up, and the fate of New Ramoth rests in the hands of this fur-covered freak—
Eddie Gnash, Sideshow P.I.

Purchasable at GravesideBooks.com

ALSO FROM
GRAVESIDE TALES

HARVEST HILL $16.95

31 Tales of Halloween Horror edited by Michael Hultquist and Douglas Hutcheson.

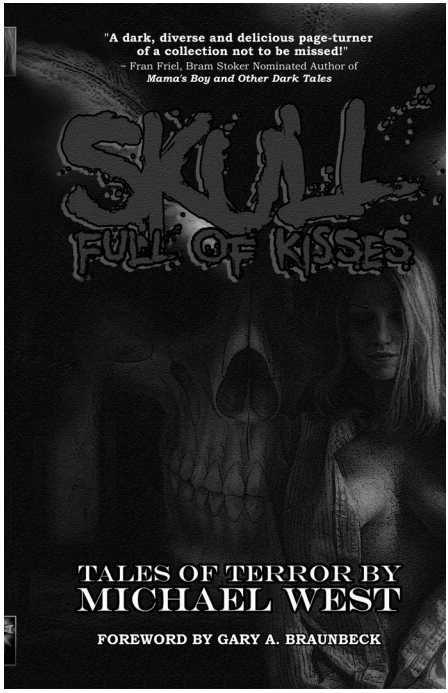


Welcome to Harvest Hill, Tennessee: a seemingly idyllic community. But within the shadows of this restful town roams a centuries-old evil that rears itself in some awful form or influence every Halloween when the veil between worlds is thinnest. We offer a choice crop of truly disturbing accounts—large and small, stretching from the 1700s into the present day. If only the residents understood the unspeakable thing that has writhed and raged among them for ages, and keeps growing …
HARVEST HILL.

Purchasable at GravesideBooks.com

ALSO FROM
GRAVESIDE TALES

SKULL FULL OF KISSES By Michael West $12.95

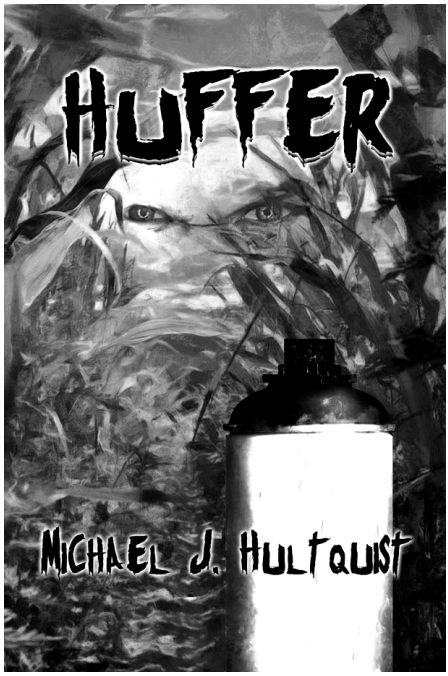


Turn the page and enter a world of shadow, as Michael West brings together his most disturbing short stories—twisted tales of forbidden desires and ghoulish deeds, where nightmares manifest in the most mundane and unlikely of places...The basement of a Japanese restaurant, where a seductive creature promises comfort to a lonely hitman, if only he will set her free...A ruined city, where survivors of a natural disaster have become prey to something unnatural...An Indiana farmhouse, where a frightened child attempts to fool the Angel of Death...And the darkest regions of space, where a man fights to protect the woman he loves from invaders only he can see...
Ten reasons to lock your doors. Ten reasons to keep the lights on. Ten reasons why you may never sleep again.

Purchasable at GravesideBooks.com

ALSO FROM
GRAVESIDE TALES

HUFFER By Michael J. Hultquist $14.95

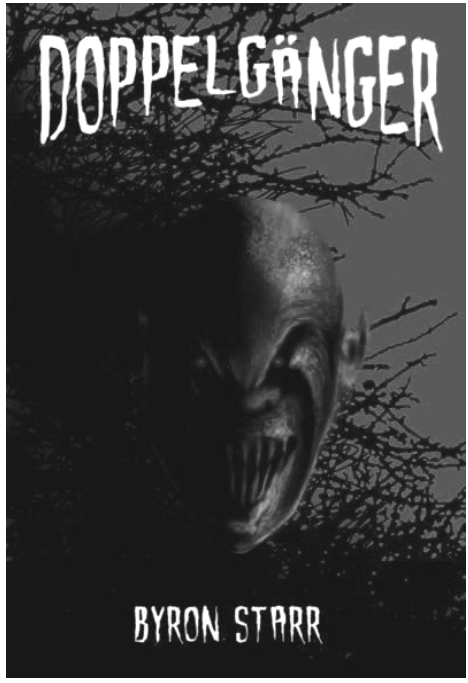


After huffing paint for too many years, Gus Gerring's life is thrown into turmoil when a Hawaiian-shirt clad entity he dubs "Satan" appears and imbues him with the power to see "evil" in other people, along with the choice to do something about it. But will knowing the evil deeds of his loved ones prove too much to take, even for Gus's chemical-ravaged mind? Especially when it comes to learning what his mother and her boyfriend had to do with his father's suicide, why his Uncle Ham is killing hookers down in Texas, or why the cops are beating a path to his door to get next week's lotto numbers. To Gus, it all seems like one horrible, huffing-induced nightmare. But is it?

Purchasable at GravesideBooks.com

ALSO FROM
GRAVESIDE TALES

DOPPELGÄNGER by Byron Starr: $14.95



James Taylor has always had strange dreams. Now a new terror has entered James's sleep, bringing with it visions of death and carnage. Visions of a beast that stalks human prey and slaughters without remorse. Visions that soon become a reality for the residents of Newton, Texas as the creature's victims are discovered. Like it or not, James knows it is up to him to act. Alone or with the help of local law enforcement, he plans to use his special talent to stop this monstrous Doppelgänger before it strikes again

Purchasable at GravesideBooks.com