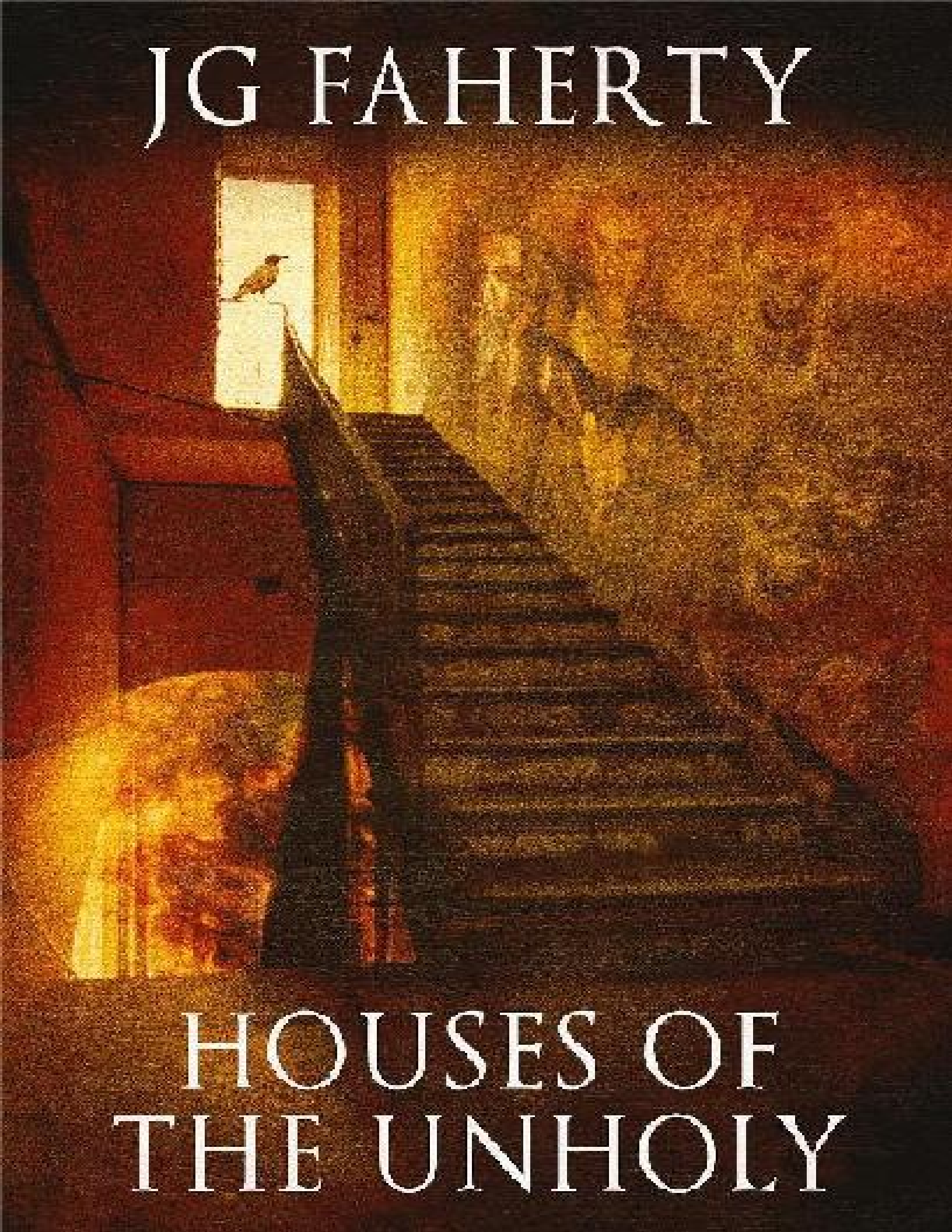
JG FAHERTY



HOUSES OF THE UNHOLY

Houses of the Unholy

By JG Faherty

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The Lazarus Effect

"They're going to come for us."

I watched the color drain from Morris's already pale face. Outside, the wind howled and battered the walls as the late February storm raged on.

He opened his mouth to argue, then nodded. "The die's been cast, brother. The future is in God's hands now."

"God's hands." The idea made me want to laugh. Or cry. I'd been doing a lot of both lately. We'd settled deep in the Adirondacks to avoid the very danger now threatening us. A new start, a chance to wait out the end of civilization in safety and then begin the long, hard job of starting over. Eighty of us: men, women, and children, all dedicated to preserving the human race.

All dedicated to God.

And now it seemed He'd turned His celestial back to us, shunning those who'd always lived their lives according to His words. What hurt the most was the knowledge that it was our beliefs that had doomed us.

Love thy neighbor as yourself.

And so we had. When they first came to us, good Christians like ourselves, we put aside our fears and offered our help.

And learned too late that God's word had led us down the wrong path. A deadly path.

The die is cast.

But what would the roll be?

****

We'd arrived in early August, the men on horseback, the women and children riding in supply-filled carts. Morris and I had selected the location. No signs of development for at least fifty miles in any direction. A hard place to find and even harder to reach, but well worth it for the seclusion and safety it offered.

It was hard work, clearing and leveling the land, building our communal shelter and work spaces. We were a carefully chosen group: people with strong minds and strong backs, people who could build a fence, dress a deer, or hoe the fields as easily as they could fix a generator or use a computer.

People who could keep us alive today and help rebuild the world tomorrow.

And, of course, people who believed in God the Almighty, but wouldn't be afraid to put down one of the Lazari if necessary.

At night we'd gather round and listen to the radio. The news from the cities was always the same. More Lazari rising every day. The government refusing to admit defeat. "Stay inside," the announcers said. "Without food they'll soon die off."

But they didn't.

Each night, Morris would lead us in prayer. We prayed for God to keep us safe, to put an end to the horror sweeping across the world. And we thanked Him for showing us the way.

Who knew our good fortune wouldn't even last until spring?

****

"What are we going to do?" I purposely kept my gaze averted from Morris's as I cleaned my gun and counted my ammunition yet again. I knew exactly how many rounds I had, and the gun was cleaner than the day I bought it, but my hands needed something to do.

Idle hands do the Devil's work.

Except these days, the Devil didn't need my hands. He had thousands of his own. And some were right outside.

"We wait," came Morris's reply. He sounded as low as I felt. Of course, spending weeks burning the bodies of friends and relatives will do that to you.

"What's the point?" I asked. "You really think we'll survive?"

"Nope." He'd developed a countrified accent, as if a good-ole-boy had lived inside him all his life and escaping the city had released it.

I waited, unsure if he was done or if it was just another one of the long pauses he'd begun affecting.

Sure enough, he continued speaking after a moment.

"But I figure the more we kill, the better the chance that someone, somewhere else, will live."

"That's crazy!" I slammed my box of bullets down, feeling a guilty pleasure at making Morris jump. "We should be figuring out a way to hide from them, so we can live."

Morris shook his head. “That ain’t what God has planned for us, brother. Our lot is to stay and fight.”

“God? I’m sick of hearing about God’s plan! Tell your God to take His plan and shove it up His ass.”

Faster than I’d have believed possible, Morris sprang from his chair and grabbed me by the shirt.

“Don’t never talk that way again! Who are you to judge the Lord? It’s Him who judges you, brother!” He let go and stepped back, his voice softer but his face still red and hard. “I know you ain’t given up your beliefs, that this is just your way of expressin’ your fear and anger. But it don’t mean you can take His name in vain. We ain’t the first of His children to suffer. Ask Lot, or Moses, or His own Son. We just have to believe that what we’re being asked to do has a higher purpose.”

For a brief second, I felt the urge to smash my gun against his face, just give it a swing like the baseball players we used to watch. Then the desire passed, and with it my anger at God, the world, our situation. Resignation took its place, the dull, heavy knowledge that my time had come, there was nothing I could do about it, so I might as well accept it.

Morris returned to his chair by the window, watching for signs of Lazari outside.

“Should’ve never left the city,” I said, more to myself than Morris. “All this was just one big tease.”

I caught a hint of movement and glanced at my brother. I’d thought maybe he’d nodded, or was getting ready to say something.

Instead, I saw he was biting his lip, while tears rolled down his cheeks.

****

We learned about the others two weeks after we arrived. After we got over our initial fear and consented to talk with them, we learned they’d left the city to escape the Lazari same as us, only a few months earlier. They seemed friendly, if somewhat aloof, and agreeable to our request for privacy. It helped that we had some common ground: we’d all been good church-going Christians before the world changed.

After that first meeting, we rarely saw their people. Sometimes, in the

silence of the afternoon, you might hear the distant sound of hammers, or the gunshots of hunters. But never a sign of them coming anywhere near the area we'd claimed as ours. It seemed we'd all come to a mutually unspoken agreement to keep to ourselves, and that was fine with us.

For the rest of the summer, life was as peaceful as we'd hoped it would be.

Then fall arrived, and with the dying of the leaves came the death of our dreams.

****

The sound of Morris's chair scraping on the wood brought me awake with a start. I'd drifted off, lulled to sleep by the sounds of the storm and the heat from the fire sputtering in the fireplace.

"What is it?" I asked, seeing his face pressed against the window.

"Thought I saw something move out there," he said.

I joined him. The storm seemed worse than before; a nasty mixture of sleet and wind that made it near-impossible to see more than twenty yards. Across the commons area, the snow and ice-covered shops and storage building reminded me of primitive structures, remnants of an ancient mound-building people that had once lived there but was now forgotten.

I strained my eyes as hard as I could, but saw nothing.

"Where?"

"Out by the trees."

From a hundred feet away, the tall pines were grotesque, malformed giants standing in a row, soldier-straight and waiting to march. How Morris had seen anything, I had no idea. But his eyesight had always been better than mine.

"How many?"

He shrugged. "One. Maybe two."

We both knew the Lazari never moved around as individuals, except when they first rose. The moment they reanimated, something guided them to each other, a pack or hive mentality. If there was one Lazari in the trees, you could bet your life there were more.

Lots more.

For the next ten minutes or so, we kept watch. The fact that the communal shelter only had windows on one side—my brilliant idea, to conserve heat in

the winter—made me nervous. The Lazari weren't stupid. The possibility they might use decoys in front of us, while a couple hundred crept up on our blind sides, had been lodged in my head ever since the storm hit. However, since we couldn't do anything about it, we just kept our eyes open and hoped for the best.

My stomach rumbled, and I thought about putting on some soup.

Something moved out by the shops, killing my hunger.

I focused all my attention on the space between two buildings, trying by sheer will to coax another few feet of visibility from the storm.

There! An indistinct shape, ghosting across the gap, visible one moment and gone the next. It could have been a deer, or a coyote, both of which were common enough in the area.

Except no animal would come out in a storm like this.

"Something by the shops," I whispered. I gripped my rifle tighter, afraid it might slip through suddenly sweaty hands.

"Over by the outhouse, too," came my brother's reply.

At least three of them, then. Which meant we were probably surrounded, or about to be.

I patted the pockets of my coat, reassuring myself that I'd filled them with rounds for the rifle and my pistol. Morris carried the shotgun and at least two pistols that I knew of.

"Doors barred?" Morris asked.

They were. I knew that because I'd put the heavy beams in place myself not six hours ago, and neither of us had been out since. Still, I glanced back and double-checked.

"Yeah. Maybe we should barricade them, too."

"Why?"

He had a point. It would take several dozen Lazari, all hitting the door at once, to even have a chance at breaking the pine bar set across each door. If it came down to that, we were dead meat anyhow. Better to have us both at the window, where at least we could take a few of them out before...

I couldn't think any further than that.

So instead, I put my face to the ice-cold glass and waited for them to make their move.

****

They came to us on a Sunday. Maybe if they'd come on any other day, things would've turned out differently. Morris might not have been so eager to help. Instead, still filled with the light of the Lord after delivering Mass, my brother invited them in.

"Love thy neighbor as thyself," he said, when I objected to their presence.

"At the sake of killing us all?"

"If we don't help, we'll all die. You know that. If we do as God requires, maybe we can root out this evil 'fore it grows too strong."

I looked at the people gathered around us. Family members, friends, lovers. The people who'd trusted us to save them from the dangers of the real world, who'd followed us halfway across the state to a place we promised them would be free of contagion.

And now here it was in their midst, in the form of two strangers who'd come into our camp, talking of dead men hiding in the woods.

Had the others brought the disease with them? Or had we? There was no way to know. Scientists had no idea what it was, or how it spread. Or how to cure it. Some had even taken to renouncing their faith in science, saying the Lazarus Effect was the retribution of an angry God.

I looked at all those faces, faces who'd entrusted their lives to us. To *me*. They were waiting for an answer. And as much as I wanted to disagree with my brother, to do so would create a rift in our community, a rift that might never heal.

"All right. We'll help."

With those words, I sealed our fate.

****

An hour after we first saw the shapes in the storm, we'd counted at least twenty of them darting back and forth between the trees. There'd been a hundred and sixteen people in the others' camp, according to what they'd told us. We'd done our best to burn our own dead over the past few months, but plenty had escaped. Assuming the same held true for the others, that meant there could be as many as a hundred Lazari in the immediate area.

Of course, our count meant nothing, considering their propensity for gathering in large groups. Who knew how many of their kind had migrated in during the winter?

"What are they waiting for?" I asked, speaking to myself – or maybe God – but expecting no response.

Morris answered me anyhow. He never was much for rhetorical questions.

"My guess is they're waitin' for the storm to break," he said. "Mebbee it's hard for them to move around on the ice, or see in the snow."

"We could go out now and pick a few off." I didn't want to, but the wait was driving me crazy. The idea of shooting a few rounds, putting a few Lazari back into their graves, doing *any-damn-thing,* was better than sitting on our asses, waiting to die.

"No. That might be what they want. Out there, we're helpless as babies. No, we wait, and then we'll take out as many as we can before we go to God."

I gritted my teeth and bit back a curse. How could Morris still believe so strongly? I tried to remember what it was like to believe like that, like I had before October. I wanted that feeling again, that beautiful light burning inside my heart. Instead, cold resentment filled me. I resented God for putting us in this position after everything we'd done for Him, sacrificed for him. I resented Morris for holding on to his faith while mine deserted me.

Most of all, I resented myself for not standing up to Morris, for spending all my years doing what the Lord and my older brother demanded, rather than what I wanted.

The sudden sound of glass shattering surprised a scream from me. Morris and I turned as the other set of windows, the ones next to us, exploded inwards. A second later, wind and sleet howled in, sending papers flying and threatening to put out our fire. A fist-sized rock tumbled across the floor.

Morris gripped my arm. "It's time, brother. Are you ready?"

Ready to die? No! I wanted to shout. But I didn't. There was no point. We only had one path left to follow.

"Yes."

****

The first Lazari appeared in the cities. Homeless persons and elderly shut ins;

people who, when they died, went undiscovered for the three days it took them to return to life. Even then, they might go undiscovered for what they really were, because the only outward difference between a Lazari and a real person was that the Lazari never spoke. No sounds at all, not when they chased you, not when they gathered in their groups, not even when you shot them or burned them.

As their numbers grew, they wandered about aimlessly, in small groups, paying no attention to the world around them. Sometimes they'd get it into their heads to chase someone, as if they remembered violence but not how to carry it out. In the beginning, this often led to more deaths, with people running into traffic or getting trampled. The scientists called this Stage Two. And if that's as far as things went, people probably could have gotten used to it. The police could've rounded up the Lazari and cremated them. End of problem.

Except once their numbers in an area grew large enough, they'd reach some kind of threshold and go from Stage Two to Stage Three.

People didn't notice at first, but unexplained deaths followed the Lazari from city to city. It took a long time for the scientists to piece that part of the puzzle together. Turned out that's how the Lazari reproduce. Scientists talked about viruses and plagues and even mental energies, but they couldn't come up with concrete answers. People would simply start dying in droves, just keeling over, no rhyme or reason to who or where, and then all those people would rise again three days later. At least the ones who weren't cremated or embalmed. But families, police, and morgues couldn't keep up with the hundreds and hundreds of people dying each day, in every city and town across the country.

Across the *world.*

That's when groups like ours started to form. People dedicated to surviving at all costs, even if it meant leaving behind the comforts of society. The governments insisted people should stay calm, wait it out. But we, and others like us, saw the truth, that the Lazari would soon outnumber the humans.

In our encampment, as winter crept up on frost-covered feet, the only question in our minds was how many Lazari were needed to reach Stage Three.

And were there enough of them in the woods to do it?

As it turned out, there were.

Six weeks after the two people ran into our camp, three men and a young girl died in their sleep. We burned the bodies, but it was too late. People in the

other camp were dying, too.

By December, we had to keep fires burning day and night, ready to burn bodies at a moment's notice. The greasy stench of roasted human flesh hung in the air, clinging to hair and clothes like a fetid slime.

Even as people died, though, Morris kept us thinking positive. "We'll be okay as long as we keep on top of it," he'd say. He repeated it so often most of us came to believe him.

And then the unthinkable happened.

Two women disappeared while outside gathering wood. The next night, my nephew, Peter, never came back from a trip to the outhouse. Less than a week later, two men never returned from a deer hunt.

We figured they'd been attacked by Lazari for food – no one had ever seen a Lazari eat, but there were rumors not all the dead got to rise again—and we mourned our losses.

Until a few days after, when a group of hunters from the other camp told us how three of their dead had disappeared from their camp while a crematory fire was being prepared. One minute they'd been under a tarp, and the next they were gone. Since they'd only been dead for a few hours, they couldn't have walked away on their own.

"They've learned something new," Morris said to me that night. "They waited for those people to die and then stole the bodies."

"But that would mean they knew when a person was going to die, so they could be there to take them." I could grant them intelligence, but prescience? That was hard to swallow.

He shrugged, indicating we couldn't dismiss the idea the Lazari could somehow know the future.

Like God.

Looking back, I think that's the moment I lost my faith.

****

They came at us fast and hard, two, maybe three dozen of them. I didn't bother trying for head shots, just fired and fired, hoping to injure as many of them as I could. Morris moved over to the second set of windows and blasted away with the shotgun. Between the two of us, we kept them from getting close to the

building. But I saw right away we were fighting a losing battle. For each one we put down, another emerged from the storm.

Their silence unnerved me. No screaming, no war cries, no howls of pain when our bullets hit them. They charged, they fell. It was like target shooting, except the ones on the ground continued to pull themselves towards us. Every now and then, Morris would shift his aim and blow the heads off the ones who crawled too close. Blood and flesh and brains covered the fresh snow and ice, turning the commons area into a huge work of grotesque modern art.

Each bloody, gory shot reminded me the Lazari weren't the zombies of lore. Their hearts still pumped blood, their nervous systems still functioned. But they weren't alive, either. According to the scientists, the brains of Lazari worked differently. Memory showed higher than normal functions, while cognitive thinking areas worked at primitive levels. Almost as if they were operating on instinct instead of reasoning.

What it all meant was that in order to kill—or rekill—a Lazari, you had to destroy the brain or burn the body to ash. A heart shot would put one down, but if you didn't place a couple of rounds into the head or torch the body, three days later it would be back again, fully healed. So although most of our shots were putting down our attackers, we knew that afterwards, if we survived, we'd have to go out and really kill the dozens of Lazari littering our courtyard.

"More to your left!" Morris yelled.

"Got 'em," I said, turning my gun and firing off six quick rounds. On the seventh pull of the trigger, the gun clicked empty.

"Reload!" I shouted. That was to let Morris know he had to cover the whole grounds, not just his half. By that point, I'd reloaded so many times my fingers went through the motion automatically, no shaking, no dropping bullets. Ten seconds later I was back at the window, ready to fire again.

Only I had nothing to fire at.

"What happened?" I asked, keeping my eyes peeled for any signs of movement.

"Don't know. That last batch seems to've been all of 'em."

I didn't believe it. I did a rough count of the bodies and came up with about forty, give or take. Not even the total of our own missing, let alone the others' camp.

We stood there, wind and sleet battering our faces through the shattered windows, for perhaps a minute before Morris noticed it.

"You smell that?"

"What?" My nose burned with cold and the metallic stink of gunfire.

"Somethin' burnin'."

I almost told him it was nothing, just his gun, and then I remembered the fireplace. Had some sparks or wood blown around in the wind and started a fire in the room? I turned quickly, half-expecting to see flames burning.

Nothing.

I moved away from the window, sniffing the air as I went. I still didn't smell anything, thanks to my frozen, clogged nose, but I did notice the room had grown warmer. At first I attributed this to being further away from the icy gusts blowing through the windows. Then I realized it was getting a lot warmer.

Too warm.

I put my hand against the wall by the chair I'd occupied earlier.

Warm. Summer day, high noon warm. It takes a lot of heat to get four inches of good wood that warm.

Especially in the middle of a nor'easter.

"Holy crap, Morris. I think they lit the house on fire."

I breathed in again, deep, and this time I smelled it. Wood smoke.

Morris came over and sniffed the air. "Son of a whore." It was the worst curse I'd ever heard him say. "I think they did."

I hurried over to the back door and grabbed the pine bar, started to push it free.

"No!" Morris's hand came down on my arm. "It's a trap."

I pictured a mass of Lazari waiting outside each door; their expressionless faces hiding their evil intent, their outstretched hands ready to clutch and tear soft flesh.

"We don't have a choice," I said, shaking him off. "I'd rather take my chances with them than burn to death."

He stared at me, and a silent communication ran between us, as sometimes happens with twins. For our entire lives, since the moment I'd been born six minutes after Morris, we'd been playing follow the leader, with me always following.

Only now things were different. The consequences of his last big decision still haunted him, the guilt and sorrow etched in deep lines on his weather-beaten face.

Now it was my turn to make a life or death decision.

He stepped back and aimed the gun at the door. "Go ahead. Open it."

I slid the bar to the floor and pulled the door open, jumping to the side at the same time. Even as I brought my gun up, Morris was already firing. I felt the wind and heat of the buckshot's passing.

The doorway was empty.

Slowly, carefully, we stepped out onto the back porch. From there we saw the orange glow of fire behind the building, and we rounded the corner, guns at the ready.

Six carefully-laid fires burned on the porch, their flames scorching—but not burning—the back wall. Smoke billowed up, too much smoke, and I took a closer look. Whoever'd build the fires had carefully laid fresh-cut pine branches on them, to produce extra smoke and odor.

"A trap," I whispered. Only not the trap we'd expected.

I heard someone yell, and I turned to see Morris surrounded by a dozen Lazari, none of whom I recognized. They stood rock-still. Morris raised his gun, took aim at one of them. I waited for the shot.

Nothing happened.

"Shoot them!" I stepped to the side so I could shoot without hitting him.

More Lazari came around the corner, positioning themselves between my brother and I. "Morris!"

He turned towards me, smiled, raised a hand as if in greeting, and then collapsed.

"No!" I aimed my rifle at the nearest Lazari. My finger froze on the trigger. I tried to force it to move. Instead, my hands opened and the gun dropped to the ground. I commanded my body to run away. Nothing happened.

Then I heard them inside my head. Talking to me. Explaining.

Suddenly, I understood what they wanted, why they were here. Why they needed Morris and I so bad they'd willingly sacrificed some of their own.

For the greater good, they told me. *For God.*

I opened myself to them, let them take me.

"Welcome, brother."

Morris's voice, one of the multitude inside me, part of me. Somehow speaking to me, even though his body wouldn't rise again for three days.

"Thank you."

"Are you ready to begin?"

"I'm afraid."

"We all were, at first. It will pass."

I believed him. I wanted to cry because it was so beautiful, and because I was so amazed by what we'd become.

The multitude rejoiced. Behind them, somewhere still too far for me to see, I felt something—*Him?*—smile, sensed an otherworldly warmth reach out to embrace me.

Yes, I *was* ready. Finally. Ready to really begin doing God's work.

I closed my eyes and felt my body fall.

The die is cast. The future is in God's hands.

And we are those hands.

Bones

Every small town has its secrets. Dirty things. Growing up in Dark Hills, I thought I knew them all. Then I learned different.

****

Elise has the gift of truth. Say something to her, or in front of her, and she knows if you're lying. It don't go no further than that. She can't see the past or future. Grams could, when she was alive. That, and so much more. But each generation inherited less and less of her abilities, a dilution of genetics. Momma tried her best to pass something along to us. She married her cousin, kept everything in the family. Her brother did the same. That's where Elise came from.

Maybe we'll have better luck.

****

I didn't pay much mind when Daisy brought home the first bone. Labradors always bring home shit to chew on, and Daisy ain't no exception. It wasn't even a big piece. I was more nervous about Daisy choking than I was about touching it. So it was more surprise than actual pain made me yelp when I pulled it from her mouth.

"Ow! Goddamn!" I dropped the bone onto the porch, quickly covered it with my foot before Daisy grabbed it. I was wearing shoes, so I didn't worry about getting shocked again.

"Kip? Somethin' wrong?" Elise called from the kitchen.

"Nothin'," And it was true. "Daisy brought in a chunk of bone and it buzzed me when I touched it."

"And why'd you touch it in the first place?" She came to the top step and leaned against the railing, crossing her summer-tanned arms and staring at me. A calculated pose. Flirting. She knew it would push up her breasts so they was close to bustin' from her old denim shirt.

As always, her beauty caught me like a squirrel in a trap. I know what you're

thinking, but things is different in Dark Hills. We ain't the first set of cousins to take up together. Most families discourage it. Ours has always had a preference for it.

If you'd ever seen Elise, you wouldn't blame me. At fifteen, she'd had a body and face to rival any actress on the covers of the magazines down to the supermarket. At twenty-one she looked even better.

Me, I wasn't quite as blessed. Better than average looks, or so I've been told, but with a price. I guess you'd call it a deformity. Extra middle finger on each hand, longer than the others. Extra toes to match. Elise says it's the extra fingers make me sensitive to the bones.

I bent down, gingerly touching the small, gray shard. No buzz, no sudden visions. Feeling more secure, I picked it up and showed it to her. "It's all right. Normally I wouldn't have felt a thing, but whatever it came from must have died in a lotta pain."

Elise's amber-hued eyes widened. "Was it a person?"

"Can't tell," I juggled the shard back and forth. "But I doubt it. Prob'ly a deer that got itself shot, or maybe hit by a car. It died in the woods, and Daisy found the remains."

"Well, be careful next time," Elise poked me with a finger. "I don't want you passin' out and knockin' yourself senseless, 'specially if I ain't around."

"That was one time." I stuck the bone in my shirt pocket. "I ain't ten no more."

"You ain't?" she asked with a little grin and a toss of her honey-blonde hair.

I know an invitation when I see it, and I accepted.

Like I said, it may seem wrong to you, but you haven't met Elise.

****

The first episode happened when I was ten. That's what Grams called them. Now I know they're visions. I picked up a pig rib during dinner and a blast of light and pain exploded in my brain. I woke up on the floor with a huge lump on my forehead. All I remembered was a sledge hammer swinging at me.

The whole thing was a mystery 'til we told Grams. She figured it out right away. Blind, lame, and confined to her bed, her mind was still as clear as stream water. "Boy's got the sight," she mumbled through a mouth empty of

teeth. “He seen the pig die in his head. Gonna have ep’sodes ever’ time he touch bone.”

Momma just about burst with joy when she heard the news. I’d finally come into my own. Elise started divining truth before she even knew what the word meant. Cousin Josh’d been healing people since he was eight. And little Tess, only four years old, could already call the animals. Until now, I’d felt like the outcast in the family. So in a way it made me happy, too, but it also scared me. What good was a gift if it practically killed me to use it?

But you learn to live with anything. I learned to be very careful ‘bout what I touched.

****

The next day Daisy showed up with another bone, a big one. It was my day off, and I was sitting on the porch, readin’ a book and drinking ice tea. She came across the back yard with that thing in her mouth and my blood ran cold. Memories of pain, blood, and burning filled my head. Over the past eleven years I’d relived being shot, beat, runned over, boiled, burned, even havin’ my throat slit.

Animals were bad. People were worse.

Not that I’d touched many human remains. The last time had been after the fire, and I’d avoided doin’ it ever since.

When I seen Daisy carryin’ that long bone, the last thing I wanted to do was touch it. Sure, it could have been a deer leg, but even from thirty feet away I felt its pull, and that usually meant human. Normally I’d’ve called Elise, but she was workin.’

I grabbed a pair of heavy work gloves from the tool shed and approached Daisy. As you might ‘spect, she struggled a bit, made me chase, before she gave up her prize. Even through the thick cotton it thrummed in my hands, givin’ off some kinda energy only I can feel.

I set it on the kitchen counter and waited for Elise to come home from her job at the library.

****

“Why? Why do you have to touch it?” Elise rarely raised her voice, ’cept when our stubborn streaks collided.

“I got to know. There’s something ‘bout it, something that calls me. It’s like when Uncle Ray-Ray would feel a storm comin.’ I get the same thing from that leg bone. It ain’t right, it ain’t...”

“Quiet?” she filled in the word I couldn’t find.

I nodded. That was as good a description as any for the unease it threw off.

“Fine. Touch it. But if your brain explodes or somethin,’ don’t come whinin’ to me.”

The harsh words were just a wall Elise used to hide her own fear. Maybe on some level the bone was working on her talent, telling her all was not what it seemed to be.

I held my fingers over it. The air vibrated around me. Hold a tuning fork to your teeth, or close your eyes and stand in front of a speaker with the volume up all the way. That’s the sensation I get near human bones. Taking a deep breath, I placed my whole hand on the length of shaft.

Pain!

Agony consumed me. Hands grabbed me, tore at my flesh. A face, but not a face. Teeth. The dry wood snap of bones breaking.

Then the nothingness of death.

I woke to find Elise wiping my forehead with a cold cloth. “Kip, oh Lord, you all right?”

She buried her head between my neck and shoulder, her tears wet against my skin. I hated that I’d frightened her so. But I’d had to do it, and now I knew why.

I gently moved her aside and stood up. I stared at the bone and tried to make sense of what I’d seen. The horror of it lingered, not the memory of the pain so much as the crippling fear of reliving someone’s murder in violent, bloody detail.

“Elise, somethin’ terrible’s happ’nin’ in Dark Hills. This man wasn’t just killed. Something, or someone, ate him alive.” Elise helped me to a chair, my legs shakier than a newborn colt’s.

“Did you see who did it?” she sat across the table from me and handed me a can of Mr. Pibb. I chugged back a mouthful of soda and collected my thoughts.

“I saw...something,” I said, trying to make sense of it myself. “Big hands.

They was tearing me apart, pullin' off pieces of my flesh. And a face full of god-awful teeth. Eatin' me alive while I watched."

By this time, I was vomiting the words instead of speaking them, spitting out the poison of my vision as fast as possible.

"Then somethin' happened, I think my neck got broke, and everything went black."

I finished talking and held the cool, sweating can against my forehead. It's always like this. I fight to get the words out, and then I can't stop them. Elise understands. When someone asks her the truth of a thing, she can't not tell. The words have a life of their own and need to be born, no matter how violent that birth.

I took a deep breath, exhaled, sipped my soda. Now I'd be able to talk about it in a normal fashion. Elise gripped my hands in hers. Comfort, love, and strength all in one gesture.

"Did you see the face?" The question I'd been dreading.

"Yes. And no. Nothin' was right about it. It was like a funhouse mirror, all distorted." I shook my head, frustrated at the lack of detail. That's the problem with death sight, though. The bones only record pieces of the memories.

"I don't think it was human," I added, not wanting to speak the words out loud, not wanting to believe what I'd seen.

"Ain't no such thing as monsters," Elise protested, but I could tell by the look on her face that she accepted the truth of it, either 'cause of her talent or 'cause of the stories we'd grown up with. Stories the adults told at night to scare the young 'uns. The oldtimers had plenty of tales 'bout strange creatures with a taste for human flesh, and the Indians had their own stories long before the white man settled here. Creatures from the deep woods who'd eat you alive and then suck the marrow from your bones.

"So what do we do?" Elise took two more sodas from the fridge, popped the tops, handed me one. Summers in Dark Hills tend to be hot, beastly affairs.

"We wait. Wherever Daisy got this, she'll bring back more." I nodded my head towards the woods behind our yard. "I can feel them now. They pull at me."

"Dark Hills cemet'ry lies that way, maybe that's what you're feelin.'" Elise's voice expressed hope, but she knew the truth. We both did.

"We'll check it out," I agreed, just to make her feel better. "Drive through, see if there's any open graves."

We did, too, after I took a nap and ate something. Of course, we didn't find nothin'.

I'd known we wouldn't.

****

I was fifteen when the fire happened, and I guess you could say it was the bestest and worstest day of my life. I'd shined on Elise since I was old enough to think of girls as somethin' more than cootie monsters, and I knew she shined on me, too. There wasn't anyone else for neither of us, but Elise kept tellin' me we had to wait, she couldn't do nuthin' 'til she was a woman. I didn't know what she meant, but I was content to hold off. Besides, you couldn't separate us anyways, at home or at school.

Home back then was two old houses on fifteen acres of property. Two hundred feet and a small pond separated them. One house belonged to my family, the other to Elise's. Our great-granddads built them back around the time Dark Hills incorporated and got its first street names.

It was a mornin' not long after my fifteenth birthday. Elise approached me while I did my chores. The summer heat had me sweatin' as bad as the pigs I was feeding. She asked if I wanted to go for a swim. I told her I had to finish my chores first, but she gave me this strange look and I knew she had somethin' important on her mind. I put down the slop bucket and off we went.

Turned out becoming a woman meant she had to get her time of the month for the first time. 'Course, back then I didn't know what that meant, either.

We went down to our private swimming hole at the creek. Elise took off her clothes, the material peeling away from her damp, freckled skin. We'd been skinny-dipping before, so the hardness 'tween my legs didn't embarrass either one of us when I took off my pants. I ran down to the water and jumped in, but Elise stayed on the bank.

"I thought you wanted to swim," I called to her.

"I do, but there's something we gotta take care of first." She crooked her finger at me, an invitation to join her under the big oak tree.

I sat down next to her, the water already steaming off me, and she explained it was time for me to become a man, 'cause she'd become a woman. Then she spread her legs and opened herself for me, showed me the blood. The cold

mountain water hadn't tamed my excitement, and I had no problem slipping into her when she guided me to her special place.

After we was done we laid on the grass together, talking 'bout how we was a real couple now. Then the bugs got to us and we jumped in the water to swim and clean up. We splashed around for 'bout an hour before Elise saw the smoke. Her truth sense told us somethin' was wrong. We got dressed as fast as we could and ran the whole mile home.

We arrived too late. Elise's house was nothing but blackened, smoking firewood. I smelled gasoline and knew right away it had to be people from town. They'd lost their fear of us after Grams had passed during the winter. My house hadn't been touched. A miracle, 'cept for the fact everyone'd been to Elise's gettin' Sunday supper ready.

Elise shouted for her momma but no one answered. I hated myself for what I had to do, but it needed doing. I grabbed her by the shoulders and got right in her face. "Elise! Listen to me! Listen! It's okay, everyone got out safe, right?" Her gift kicked in as I'd known it would.

"No they didn't! They's all dead!" The words tumbled out on their own accord and sat like rotten meat in my stomach as I waited for her to realize what she'd said. Then she screamed, long and loud, not even words, just a terrible wailing.

I held her in my arms until the howls died down and the cryin' started. We were alone now, and yet we weren't. We'd always be together.

****

I watched Daisy for two days. I dreaded seeing another bone, but there was a sick anticipation as well. I'd come home from the shop and look all around the house, under the porch, behind the sofa. All the places she liked hidin' her treasures. Then on Wednesday, right in the middle of supper, in she walks pretty as you please, another bone in her mouth. And not just any bone. There was no hiding the nature of it. Human, one whole side of the lower jaw.

"Aw, shit." Elise dropped her fork on her plate. "Kip, that don't look very old."

She didn't have to tell me. Gristle dangled off the back where the notch is, and bits of reddish-brown meat clung to its surface. The force of its presence

bombarded me with sick energy. It was the heat of sunlight turned dark, a wave of corruption, a solid odor of wrongness. It was all those, but not exactly.

Elise pulled it from Daisy's mouth and waited while I shooed the dog out of the house.

"Put it on the living room floor, away from the furniture." I had to touch it, I had to know. But I preferred to pass out on the living room carpet rather than the hard linoleum.

Elise grabbed a pillow from the couch and set it on the floor. No questions this time. I knelt down before that jaw like I was prayin' to some weird God, then I reached out and touched it. All twelve fingers, no pussyin' around.

The world broke apart around me, pieces of living room falling away, revealing bright white light in all directions. Unseen machines beeped and buzzed. Something punched me in the chest, once, twice. Then the light dimmed, growing gray. The mechanical noises faded away at the same time.

Blackness.

I opened my eyes. I still knelt on the carpet, the greasy jawbone clutched in my hands. "It was a woman." I stood up, placed the bone on a shelf. "In a hospital. Her heart stopped and they tried to shock her, but she died."

"Then we can find out who it was. All we have to do is ask Coombs." Sheriff Roy Coombs tried to rape Elise when she was twelve. For her to suggest talking to him indicated how serious she took this.

"And maybe that will lead us to who, or what, did this." I pointed a finger at the teeth marks on the side of the jaw. "This lady might have died a natural death, but somethin' made a meal out of her afterwards."

I let Daisy back inside while Elise cleared the dishes. Neither of us felt like eatin' no more.

****

Even though we showed up unexpected, Sheriff Coombs welcomed us into his office and offered us some coffee. It was only seven-thirty in the morning, but he was awake enough to realize we had somethin' important on our minds. Not that he'd've refused us.

We explained about the bones, and what I'd seen. Then I showed him the jaw.

"Mm-hmm. Now let me get this straight, Kip. You two think there's something out there eatin' dead people, and you want to know who's died recently? That's a little far-fetched, don't you think?" Coombs drained his coffee mug "This town may have more'n its share of odd folk, no disrespect intended, but I doubt anyone's a cannibal."

He leaned back and crossed his arms over his ample belly. The swivel chair creaked under his three hundred pounds. Missus Coombs was a good cook, and the Sheriff wasn't one to turn down seconds. Or thirds.

"Sheriff, you don't have to believe us. And we ain't askin' you to send out the dogs or nuthin.' Just tell us if any old women died in the hospital recently." Elise fixed her meanest stare on him. "Or maybe I should have a talk with the missus, have her ask me the truth 'bout what goes on at the Brew House after hours."

"Now, no need for that," Coombs dropped his feet to the floor, his scowl matching Elise's. "Deaths are matters of public record, so I got no problem tellin' y'all. What you do with the information is your business."

He lit a cigarette and blew smoke towards the ceiling. "Only person died in the last week was Emily Johnston, lived over on Second Avenue. Heart attack. Family buried her in the cemetery three days ago. So your vision didn't lie, Kip. "

Rings of smoke wafted upwards, adding to the layers of yellow nicotine on the acoustical tiles. "But since you can't tell me nothin' 'bout the other bones 'cept for monster stories, I can't help you no more."

Coombs stood up and put on his hat. "Now, if you'll 'scuse me, I got me a town to protect." He uttered this last with a nasty laugh. Protecting Dark Hills consisted of keeping drunken teens off the streets and patrolling the highway for speeders.

All three of us knew his style of law enforcement was the reason me 'n Elise had resorted to our own brand of justice six years ago. Looked like the time was comin' where we'd have to do it again.

****

We soon discovered we couldn't do much more on our own. Elise called the hospital, but they wouldn't talk to her since she wasn't a relative. We drove out

to the cemetery again, but Emily Johnston's grave was so fresh they hadn't even laid sod yet. And we wasn't about to break the law by digging it up ourselves to check the coffin.

That night the bones called to me as I lay in bed. A feeling I know too well, almost as if my own skeleton resonates with the psychic pulsations emitted by other bones. I vibrate inside like a tuning fork, and ache worse'n an old man on a cold, damp winter night.

They were close, closer than the cemetery to the other side of town. If I wanted to, I could follow their evil call and find their secret place, especially with a three-quarter moon hanging over head. Sunlight dulls my gift, at least the part that lets me sense bones from a distance. But now, in the dark, they were a magnet and I was a piece of iron.

Just one problem. I didn't have the courage to get out of bed and go searching. Instead I lay there, hurting. Angry and 'shamed at myself, but happy to be a coward. I reached out with an arm, stroked Elise's silky hair. Better to be scared and alive than dead and gone.

I made a promise to myself right then. Stay out of it, let the police handle it.

****

Three days went by before my secret promise fell to pieces. Elise and I were having a drink out on the porch. She leaned on my shoulder, the purple twilight sky a painted backdrop for the rising full moon. Everything was peaceful and beautiful, and for the first time in days I wasn't thinking about cannibals or skeletons. I still ached, but the corn mash whiskey did wonders to numb the pain. I had high hopes Elise's hands and mouth would finish the job later on. But for now we were content to just sit and stare at the sky.

That's when Daisy came out of the woods and my left hand spasmed with torturous pain. I dropped the glass and cried out.

"What is it?" Elise grabbed my trembling arm.

"Daisy's got somethin,' a bone, it has to be," My hand twisted and clenched, an alien snake attached to my body. "It hurts! Goddamn it, how can it hurt? I haven't even touched anything!"

I pulled free from Elise, used my right hand to pin my left arm against my stomach.

Elise ran over to Daisy, pulled something from her mouth. In the fading light her face grew moon-pale as the blood drained from it. She cupped the object in her hands, hiding it from me.

"I know why your hand hurts." Pain and unshed tears filled her voice. "It's a finger bone." A pause. "It's Grams' finger."

She couldn't have stunned me more if she'd told me it was my own. "What? How do you know?" I started down the stairs, wanting to see for myself. Each step inflamed the pain further. Now someone had my hand in a vice and was smashing my ring finger with a hammer.

"Don't come any closer!" Elise moved away from me, increasing the distance between us. The hammering lessened. "Look from there."

She held up the bone. Something flashed in the moonlight. Silver and opal. Grams' ring, the one she'd worn every moment of her life, and death. I'd placed it on her finger myself before we buried her.

"Bring it here." I had to touch it. Grams died peacefully in her sleep. It shouldn't hurt me to touch her. But it would. And I had to know why.

Elise shook her head, backed away again, but I followed. I didn't say anything, just held out my shaking, twitching hand. We've never needed words, didn't need them now. She understood.

"Be ready," I whispered, and she nodded. Then she dropped the finger into my waiting palm.

There was pain, but mercifully short. Then came the vision.

****

I sat in my uncle's house, the one that's gone now, burned. Cross-legged on the old throw rug in front of the rocker, where I used to sit as a child. Grams rocked slowly in her chair, as she was want to do after supper. I started to speak, tell her how I've missed her, but she hushed me with a finger to my lips.

"Quiet, Kipper, and listen. I don't have much time in your world. Neither you nor Elise gots the gift of dreams, or I could've come to you easier. This was the only way."

The back and forth motion of her chair soothed me like a lullaby, drew my attention to her until all I saw was the steady movement. Her words came to me as if from far away.

“You and ’Lise gots work to do. There’s an evil in the woods that shouldn’t be, a thing born of folk who shoulda known better. Not many in town knows about it, wouldn’t do nuthin’ no ways anyhow. You gots to be strong, Kipper, and Elise, too. Find the evil, put an end to its misery, for it surely isn’t a happy thing. Do it right now, while the moon is full and your gift is at its peak, or you’ll fail. Don’t let us down, Kipper. We’ll do our part too. Just follow the call of our bones.”

Rock-rock-rock. Everything blurred. I couldn’t see Grams’ face any longer, just a swirl of color moving back and forth, and...

...I sat up, arms and shirt wet from the dewy grass. Elise held my head against her chest, rocked me back and forth as she sobbed.

“It’s okay, I’m back now,” I whispered against her breasts, the thin cotton of her T-shirt damp with sweat and tears.

“Oh, Kip, that was the worst one ever. You dropped like a stone soon’s her finger touched your flesh. For a minute I thought you was dead, and then I thought you might never wake up.” She didn’t let go, just held me close and rocked.

“How long was I out?” The star-speckled night sky told me some time had passed. To me it only seemed like a minute or so.

“Fifteen minutes, you bastard,” she punched my arm, half crying and half angry. “Don’t never scare me like that again.”

Normally I’d laugh and then promise, but not this time. “I can’t do that. There’s more to come our way tonight, and I don’t think we’re gonna like it.”

She pushed my head away and looked me in the eyes. “Tell me.”

And I did.

****

My visions have layers. What’s seen, what’s heard, what’s felt. And what comes after. During the visions I’m right there, relivin’ however the person or animal died. Then come the subconscious clues, sometimes memories, sometimes my own interpretations of what I saw. Fr’instance, during a vision I might see myself holdin’ a steering wheel and driving into a tree. But when I wake up, I’ll know, or remember, it was a blue car with a California license and a dent on the rear fender, even though I never saw the car during my vision.

After my visit with Grams, I grabbed a beer and sat down at the kitchen table. She'd spoken of having more to do, and sure enough I found the instructions in my head.

I was to go alone into the woods and start walking. Follow the call of the bones. When I got where I needed to be, I'd know what to do. Something dangerous was loose out there, and I had no desire to enter those woods by myself, but I had Grams' assurances she'd be protecting me. That was enough for me.

Grams had said to trust my talent, so I reckoned findin' the place would be easy. What came after might not be.

I had instructions for Elise as well. She had to get the sheriff and bring him to me. It was his job to make sure no one stopped me. Elise protested mightily but in the end she agreed. She went into town with the car, while I headed into the woods with a flashlight and shotgun.

Soon's I stepped 'cross the tree line my gift kicked up a notch. I felt the bones, lots of them, pulling at me, drawing me forward as if I had a rope around my waist. I turned on my flashlight, but I only needed it to avoid trees and rocks. My feet guided me in the right direction with no thought on my part.

As I walked, I remembered.

****

The fire wiped out both our families, left me and Elise orphans, and the sheriff hadn't done a damn thing about it. Apologies out the ass, but all he could tell us was there wasn't enough evidence to arrest anyone. Of course, he hadn't taken more'n ten minutes to look the place over. He wouldn't even admit it was arson.

We vowed to take care of things ourselves. But first we had to bury our dead. That didn't cost nuthin,' seein' as how the remains was put to rest in the small family plot that sits on our property.

Buryin' them wasn't the hardest part. Touchin' 'em first was.

It was pure horrible, all the burning and screaming and pain. But I saw enough to give Elise the names. Then it was her turn. She confronted those people in public. Everyone in Dark Hills knows about her talent, so they accepted the truth of her accusations. Three people in all. Little Jimmy

Sweeny, Floyd McCarragal, and Mickey Donahue.

When Sheriff Coombs heard what we'd done, he paled as if we'd told him it was his own son. And for good reason. Big Jim Sweeny was the town judge. McCarragal and Donahue came from well-to-do families as well. Coombs found his self stuck between the rock of pissin' off the town leaders and the hard place of doin' the right thing by the people of Dark Hills. Even though most folk hated us, they'd never trust a sheriff who let three murderers go free.

He did the only thing he could to keep peace and save his job. He persuaded each boy to enlist in one of the armed services, right away. And they did.

Within a year, McCarragal ended up dyin' in a helicopter crash. Sweeny was 'rrested for selling dope, dishonorably discharged, and earned his self ten years at Leavenworth. Donahue met himself a nice Filipino girl who gutted him with a knife during a bar fight.

Later, Elise told me she'd known those boys would die somehow as soon as Coombs told us how sending them away would be better than no revenge at all.

No one in town has bothered us since.

****

The pain inside me grew worse the further I walked, and so did the force leading me on. A black hole gripped me, reeled me closer and closer to a fire that spared my skin but burned my insides. I wouldn't have been surprised if Hell itself opened its maw and consumed me.

The trees and brush blurred around me, mixed up striations of light and dark – white overhead where the full moon shone through, the green-black of the forest, and the yellow beam of my flashlight. A marionette on an invisible string, I stumbled into branches and over roots like a sleepwalker or a drunken cripple, but I didn't fall.

I reached the clearing and knew I'd arrived where I had to be. The fire inside me swelled and dimmed simultaneously. I knew the pain was there, larger than ever, but something shielded me from it. I closed my eyes and Cousin Josh's presence flowed over me. Josh, who'd died in the fire. Whose gift had been the ability to take away people's pain and heal them. As in life...

Now I knew what Grams had meant by "We'll do our part, too." They were all here, helping me. My family. I smiled and opened my eyes.

I wasn't so afraid anymore.

****

The clearing was easily as large as our family's acreage. And it wasn't empty. Grave markers jutted up from the ground at odd angles. A secret cemetery, built by someone, or something. But why?

The bones in their shallow graves sang to me as I examined the primitive markers. Stone cairns, made from rocks ranging from fist-size to bowling balls. Branches tied together to create rough crosses. I wondered if the grave markers had any particular meaning, if stone or stick held special significance.

No flowers decorated the graves, no names held place on the stones. Just freshly turned soil and the hand-made markers indicated underground occupants. Some of the graves had been disturbed, dug up. Broken and shattered bones poked out of the peat-laden soil. I figured I'd found Daisy's secret stash.

I knew Grams' body was there somewheres. I felt her presence, which meant she'd been dug up from the family plot and brought here. Then there was the old lady who'd died the other day, Emily Johnston. She was supposed to be over to Dark Hills Cemetery. I walked back and forth across the graves, hands out, trying to locate Grams' remains.

Then the true nature of this horror became clear when something stepped out of the shadows.

****

It almost looked human, until it shuffled into a patch of moonlight and I saw the differences. Naked, and definitely male, it shambled between the grave markers, tall with wide shoulders but stooped over, as if from years of carrying heavy loads. Large hands, with long fingernails. Thick, matted hair covered most of its body.

I shone my flashlight in its face, the face from my visions, but it didn't even pause, just raised a hand to shield its eyes. Like a person would.

Every feature stood out clearly in the beam of my light, erasing the fuzzy impression I held in my head. Human, but not human. A freak of nature. Not

like me with my extra digits, but somethin' much worse. A mutation, a movie monster come to life. It wasn't natural, this walking nightmare, and somewhere deep inside me a little boy came to life, a scared boy who'd just learned campfire tales can come true.

An oversized head, flatter on one side than to the other, perched atop a thick neck. Human eyes, brown and filled with dim intelligence, sat crookedly over a piggish snout filled with tusks to put a rutting boar to shame. Looking into those eyes, I knew it would never win no spelling bees or drive a car, but it could dig a grave well enough. It glanced at my shotgun and those eyes narrowed. It knew weapons, too.

I could've raised the gun right then and shot it, but I didn't have it in me. Maybe it was those too-human eyes. I couldn't kill it, him, in cold blood. Not yet.

"Don't come no closer." I shook the gun a little. "I don't want to hurt you. But I can't let you kill no more."

The creature grunted, but kept coming at me. As it drew closer its smell hit me, a musty, high odor, the stench of unwashed fur and shit you smell on animals in the traveling circus. I raised the gun, intendin' to put a shot between us, scare him. That's when Elise arrived.

"Kip? You out here? Kipper!" The thing changed direction, moved towards her voice.

No! Not Elise. I couldn't let that happen. I ran forward and jabbed it with the gun, still hopin' I wouldn't have to pull the trigger.

"Hey!" I shouted louder than I had to, so Elise would hear also. "Stay right there, pig boy!"

I wanted to distract it, keep it occupied 'til the sheriff arrived, but I hadn't counted on its speed or strength. It swung one furry arm, catching me 'cross the face with the back of its hand. My feet left the ground and I landed on a grave marker. The stones knocked the breath outta me and I dropped the gun and the flashlight.

I lay there, stunned, as the thing grabbed my shirt and picked me up. Its awful breath washed over me, reminding me of the time Josh tried to make stew out of some bloated rabbit carcass he'd found. I gagged and tried to break free but it had me good. The piggy snout came forward, open and drooling. Rows of yellow teeth sat behind the tusks, all getting ready to turn me into supper.

"Horace! Horace Dean! Put him down now, or I'll shoot!" The creature

turned around as Sheriff Coombs stepped out of the woods, Elise right behind him, along with some other folks.

The monster dropped me and I crawled away from it. It didn't follow, just stood there, lookin' back and forth 'tween me and Coombs. It moaned and groaned, not growls, more like the sounds bears make when they play. It might've been tryin' to talk. Prob'ly was, which didn't make me feel no better 'bout comin' out here to kill it.

I scooted backwards on my ass and hands. As I did so, one hand went into soft earth, touched somethin' hard. Lights flashed in my head, and Grams appeared before me.

"Kip, you done good. But it ain't over yet. That thing in front of you, it's real, not no fairy tale monster from those books you read. Thomas and Emily Dean share a lotta blood, and things like this happen sometimes in families. God knows we've had our share of monsters born. It should've been done 'way with when Emily delivered, but Thomas couldn't bear to kill his only son. So they raised it best they could, hidden 'way from everyone." Grams shook her head sadly.

"Does that mean it's human?" I asked.

"No! Human born it be, but monster it is. It's got a taste for man flesh, can't change that. The Deans kept it under control for a long time, but it done got too strong for them. Soon it'll begin taking more people to satisfy its cravin's. Time's come for you to finish what they should'a done thirty years ago.

The light went away. I was on my back in damp grave dirt. In front of me nothing had changed. Horace Dean, deformed, mutant son of Dark Hills' richest family, stared at Sheriff Coombs and Elise. Judge Sweeney and Mayor Donlevy stood behind them. I guess Elise'd really put on a show in town. Nothin's scarier than the threat of the truth.

I picked up my shotgun and stood. "Elise, Sheriff Coombs. I'm all right."

Elise cried out my name, her relief obvious.

"Clear everybody back. It may have a name, but that don't change what it's done. The Deans can't control it. The flesh of the dead ain't enough for it anymore." The town fathers gasped as I said this. I guess they hadn't known about Horace's habit of eatin' the dead. And more recently, helpin' his self to the living.

"No!" Thomas Dean, president of Dark Hills' only bank, pushed past the other men. "He's my son! You can't kill him!"

"Mister Dean, you can't keep him locked up, and you can't change him. Sooner or later, he's gonna kill again. Go on, Elise, tell him the truth of it." All heads turned in her direction.

"It's true, Mister Dean. I can feel it. Horace will kill again and again. It's time." Tears ran down her face, although I couldn't be sure if they was for Horace or for me, for what I had to do.

Coombs grabbed the elder Dean by the arm and drew him back. Horace shifted his gaze from them to me. Something in those too-human eyes told me he knew. I raised the gun and took careful aim, my vision more than a little fuzzy from my own tears. He hadn't asked to be born that way. Cannibal monster he might be, but in my heart I was about to kill a man.

I pulled the trigger before I could change my mind.

The sound of the shotgun echoed with a lion's roar and Horace Dean's head disappeared in an explosion of hair, bone, brain, and blood.

I fell to my knees and vomited onto someone's grave.

****

I sat at the kitchen table, my head in my hands. Two days later and I couldn't stop thinkin' 'bout what I'd done. It didn't matter if everyone said I did the right thing. I'd been the one to pull the trigger, not them.

Elise came in, placed a small paper bag on the table. "I was just talkin' to the sheriff. He said they ain't diggin' up any of the graves Horace made unless families request it. He's gonna have Reverend Collier say some prayers, make the ground holy so it's a real graveyard. They're gonna leave Horace's markers there and just put a list of names on a plaque outside the fence they'll be building."

"That's good. In his own way, Horace knew he was doin' wrong, and he tried to make it right." I looked up at her. "What's in the bag?"

Elise opened it and turned it over on the table. Something small and white fell out.

Bone.

"Nothing anybody says will take away your guilt." She nudged the bone towards me and rose from the table. "Maybe you'll find out you murdered a man in cold blood. If so, then you'll have to carry a burden for the rest of your

life. But maybe," she added, "you'll find out something different." She left the room to me and Horace.

If I'd been thinkin' clear at that moment, I'd've known she'd already seen the truth of it. Instead, I reached out and touched him.

****

Pain, horrible pain. The world is full of it, all the time. Want to do right. Can't help self. Hungry. Do the bad thing, Eat the peoples. Hide. Don't want to do bad thing no more.

See the gun, the flash of light. More pain.

Peace.

Primitive

Images. Faces and words flickered in random fashion inside the man's head, their meanings just beyond his grasp.

Pain. Belly. *Hunger.* He opened his mouth to say words to the woman. Only sounds came out. He snarled and turned away. Stamped his foot.

More pictures. *Cabin. Food.* The man grabbed the woman's arm. Pulled her through the woods. She held her belly, round and heavy with child. Always hungry now.

A clearing. In the center stood a small wooden building. The man stopped. Tried to remember.

Why had they come?

He crept toward the building.

Cabin, it's a... The word disappeared.

He put his face close to something square, shiny. Another man stared back at him.

Me? Yes. No. Stranger.

Long white hair, thin face. Mind pictures. *Dark clothes. Tight cloth around his neck. Short gray hair.*

The man reached out to the stranger, who raised a hand back.

Another flash. A name...

Gone.

He screamed. Swung his hand at the stranger. It struck something hard. Not flesh. Sharp things cut his hand.

The woman touched his arm, pointed to her mouth and ripe belly.

Hungry, always hungry.

They needed food. New picture: *Stick.* Dig with stick, catch bugs. He took the woman's hand, hurried back into the woods. Important to find stick.

Before picture disappeared.

****

Jack Walcott squinted against the bright afternoon sun and read the road marker. Another mile to the turnoff for Hendrickson's last known location, a

cabin deep in the hills of North Carolina, thirty miles from the nearest town.

According to the report, Hendrickson had chosen the place for its seclusion. No cell service, no internet. Just two weeks of solitude before returning to New York, ready to kick corporate ass again.

Except he hadn't returned.

Driving along the pitted road, trying to see through the dust and flies painting the windshield, Jack wondered what the hell Hendrickson had been thinking.

His kind of money, I'd be relaxing in Greece or the Caribbean. Not some half-assed shack in the woods.

Even keeping a careful eye on the odometer he almost missed the turn and had to slam on the brakes. The Jeep fishtailed on rough, cracked asphalt. Cursing, Jack turned onto the access road.

Road? More like a path, he thought, as the woods closed in around him. Interwoven branches filtered the afternoon sun and lent a timeless quality to the day. The rental bounced and shimmied its way across roots, dips, and potholes. Low-hanging limbs scraped the sides and top as Jack fought with the steering wheel.

I don't think I'm getting the deposit back on this one.

By the time he arrived at his destination, dusk had pushed most of the daylight away and he was sure the ride had knocked several of his organs out of place.

Then he saw it.

The cabin squatted near the back of a meadow, an unsightly blight amidst a scene of beauty. The golden rays of the fading sun failed in their attempt to add warmth to the faded walls, sagging, lichen-covered roof, or splintered window frames. The sight of it sent a nervous shudder down Jack's spine as he imagined all the creepy-crawly things waiting inside.

He shut the car off but remained in his seat, rubbing his hand across the scar on his chin. A nervous habit he'd had since high school, when he'd still been embarrassed by the damage the bicycle accident had done to his face. The pictures in the file showed a tiny but neat little place, only a year old. Nothing like the decrepit hovel slumping before him.

"Real cozy place. What the hell was Hendrickson thinking?"

Although all he wanted was to turn around and head back into town, to erase the memory of the horrid place from his brain with some beer—or better yet, whiskey—Jack grabbed his duffel and exited the car. He still had a job to do.

After taking a moment to savor the evening air, sweet and mellow like southern tea with its hints of honeysuckle and wildflowers, he reluctantly set off toward the shack. Knee-high summer grass coated his slacks and socks with prickly seeds and the last of the day's bees hummed lullabies as he disturbed their lethargic attempts to load up just a little more pollen before heading back to their hives.

He paused at the bottom of three rotted steps to pull a heavy-duty flashlight from his duffel, then flipped the rusted latch and pushed the door. It moved a couple of inches and then stuck, forcing him to ram his shoulder against the peeling wood to dislodge it from the warped frame. Dust and bits of rotten wood rained down on him as he stepped through the doorway.

If anything, the cabin was more unsightly inside than out. Massive spider webs festooned the angles between walls and flaccid ceiling of the single room. Layers of dust covered everything. A rusted wood-burning stove against the far wall. A stained mattress in one corner with a mildewed blanket crumpled nearby. A card table stood sentinel in the kitchen area, the leftover food on a lone dirty dish long since desiccated and overgrown with mold. A folding camp chair with a crooked leg hunched painfully near the table.

Warped boards groaned and bent under Jack's feet. With a sigh, he set his duffel bag down and changed into a pair of sneakers, jeans, and a T-shirt. He'd planned on sleeping in the cabin, but after another look at the mattress he decided to spend the night in the jeep.

What I wouldn't give for a room at the Hilton right now. Or even an Econo Lodge. He paused long enough to shut the door and swing the latch closed.

It's gonna be a long night.

****

Jack woke to bright sunlight and birdsong. He rubbed the grit from his eyes, then looked at his watch and swore.

Five in the morning? I don't even get up this early for work.

He stretched his cramped body, wincing at each pop and creak, then glanced at the cabin.

The front door hung open.

Somebody was here.

His heart skipped. He remembered shutting the door when he left.

"Oh, hell." He'd left all his stuff in the cabin. He rubbed his chin while he cursed his own stupidity. It wouldn't happen again. He took his gun and crossed the field, morning dew dampening the hem of his jeans.

"Dammit!" Clothes and toiletries were scattered around the dusty room. Some of his shirts and pants were missing. The ones that remained looked like a wild animal had tried to make a nest out of them. Toothpaste splatters stained the walls and floor.

Jack returned to the Jeep, where chrome reflected the morning sun in miniature novas, and retrieved his digital camera. Thanking the gods of fortune that he hadn't left that in the cabin, too, he took several photos of the inside and out, documenting everything for the file and the large reimbursement claim he'd be turning in. Once he finished, he salvaged what he could and tossed it in the Jeep. The idea Hendrickson had caused the destruction seemed remote. More likely it had been some locals, maybe teenagers. The sheriff in town had mentioned something about groups of backwoods people who "didn't cotton to outsiders." But they weren't supposed to be anywhere near Hendrickson's cabin.

Wishing for a grande iced latte, he made do with a breakfast of soda and Pop-Tarts from his cooler and then called the office, knowing Maggie would be there early in his absence.

"Morning, Mags." He pictured his secretary setting up her files for the day.

"Hi. It's a little early for you, isn't it?" Maggie's soft voice barely cut through the static-filled connection.

"Tell me about it. Someone broke into the cabin last night, ruined all my clothes. I'm going to look around some more, scout along the property line."

"Shouldn't you call the police?"

Jack gave a short laugh. "You haven't met the cops around here. It's like Mayberry RFD, only they aren't as friendly."

He waved at a bee buzzing around his head.

"Maybe they don't like private investigators."

She sounded serious but Jack knew his secretary's sense of humor when he heard it.

"Ha ha. I don't think they like anybody who wasn't born and raised here. I feel like I went back in time fifty years. I need a shower, a drink, and food that hasn't been deep fried, not necessarily in that order."

"All right." A pause. "Be careful."

"I always am. I'll check in again this afternoon."

Jack thumbed the phone off and holstered it with a practiced motion. He stared into the woods. Whoever had snuck in had to have left some kind of clue. And he'd bet his paycheck that whoever it was either had something to do with Hendrickson's disappearance or knew who did.

What the hell. Time for a walk in the forest.

Pistol in hand, he headed for the wooded area behind the cabin. Fifteen minutes later, he came across a scrap of cloth hanging from a branch. The color matched one of his missing shirts.

Sons of bitches. You messed with the wrong city boy.

Lips tight with anger, Jack moved deeper into the woods.

****

By noon, Jack was ready to admit defeat. Covered in sweat and dirt, scratched from the innumerable thorn bushes that clogged the spaces between the trees, and with bug bites on top of bug bites, he'd had it. Thanks to a misstep into a stream, his feet squished inside his sneakers and he couldn't get thoughts of ticks and Lyme disease out of his head.

Ten more minutes and that's it.

A few steps later, he discovered the clearing.

A mold-encrusted, dilapidated shelter sat partway across the overgrown field. Hardly more than a lean-to, it fought a losing battle with gravity.

As unexpected as the structure was, even more astounding were the people in front of it.

An ancient-looking man, straggles of white hair hanging limp and greasy from his liver-spotted head, stood next to a woman young enough to be his granddaughter. Both of them were covered in grime. She balanced a filthy, naked child on her hip. With her free hand, she poked at the ground with a thin stick, as did her companion. Her hair lay in tangled knots that hung to her shoulders. She was completely nude, while the old man wore a brand new golf shirt and plaid boxer shorts.

Rage exploded inside Jack. *That's the bastard who stole my clothes! What's* she *doing with him?*

He shook his head, trying to control his fury. He couldn't remember ever being this angry. It took all his willpower not to rush forward and beat the old man senseless, keep him away from the woman.

His woman.

Where the hell did that thought come from? Focus, Jack. You've seen naked women before.

Jack gritted his teeth and stayed still. Something weird was going on and it was his job to find out what.

The woman *poke-poked* with her stick. Jack found himself growing painfully hard at the sight of her, had the sudden urge to run across the field and fuck right there in the dirt. Instead, he lifted his camera, forcing himself to document the scene. The old man uttered a low grunt and licked something off the end of the stick.

Jesus Christ! They're catching bugs like chimps. What the hell is going on here?

Jack snapped another picture. The man and woman turned, stared right at him.

How did they hear that?

The geriatric hermit pointed at him with his stick and shouted. With his other hand, he waved the woman and child toward the shack. The woman screamed, displaying a black hole devoid of teeth. Then she gripped the baby and ran for the shelter.

Faster than Jack would have believed, the old man sprinted toward him.

The closer he came, the greater Jack's fury grew, until it swallowed him in an overwhelming rage. He dropped the camera and gun and stepped into the clearing, fists raised.

The smell reached Jack first, a vile stench of shit, dirt, and old sweat. A moment later, powerful hands gripped his throat and ragged nails clawed at his flesh. The hoary face filled Jack's field of vision, all matted beard, rotted teeth, and rancid breath.

With a snarl, Jack pulled at his attacker's scabbed and dirty fingers. Frail bones snapped inside the gnarled hands. The man howled and pulled away. Sunlight glinted on a heavy ring, and Jack had time to wonder at it.

Then a savage, seething red devoured all rational thought.

****

Maggie Pearson knocked on the doorframe. “Mr. Nicholls?”

“Hello, Maggie.” Thomas Nicholls, VP of Operations at Waters & Lyons Investigations, set down the file he’d been reading. “Have you heard from Walcott?”

“No, sir. Not since yesterday morning. No messages and he’s still not answering his phone. I called the rental company. He hasn’t returned his car.”

“We’ve waited long enough.” Nicholls picked up his phone. “I’m sending a team down there. And I’ll contact the police, have them provide backup this time.”

****

Carl Taylor came to a stop next to the two Ashe County Sheriff’s vehicles parked by the cabin. Through the haze of dust kicked up by the tires, he made out one officer standing near the sagging front stoop and assumed the others were inside.

“Good morning, Deputy.” He held out a business card. “Carl Taylor, Waters & Lyons Investigations. This is my partner, Ken Jackson.” Taylor motioned at the tall man struggling to extract himself from the rented Kia.

“I’m Deputy Stone.” The officer jerked his thumb toward the cabin. “Lieutenant Carson and Deputy Graham are inside.”

“Thanks. Okay if we go in?”

“Sure. They already took photos and prints. Now they’re just going through the mess.”

Taylor paused. “You’re not referring to...”

Deputy Stone smiled. “No, not a body. From what we can tell, it’s the same vandalism Walcott reported to his secretary. By the way, we found his iPad in the car. No entries or emails since he disappeared. Sorry.”

Taylor nodded and went in to speak with the officer in charge. The heat inside the cabin pounded at him and he immediately regretted eating breakfast, as the eggs mingled with the musty, hot air and threatened to turn his stomach inside out.

Taylor introduced himself and Jackson and thanked both officers for their

help. Carson went over their findings, then led them back outside.

"Cooler out here." Carson wiped sweat from his forehead, spat a reddish-brown stream of tobacco juice into the grass. "I don't know what you've been told, so I'll give you the quick version. We found everything like you see it. Looks like he slept in the car. Can't say as I blame him."

"Anything else?"

"Appears he came back at least once. We got shoeprints coming out of the woods, and someone dumped over a cooler. Found candy wrappers and soda cans. We also found a pair of men's shoes next to the Jeep."

"What about the vandalism?"

"We think it was two people. We found footprints on one of the trails behind the cabin, couple different sizes, at least one barefoot. Appears Walcott followed them into the woods. Now, why would he do that? I met the man and I wouldn't peg him for the outdoors type."

Taylor shrugged. "Jack's one of our top corporate investigators. He handles a lot of different kinds of cases, and he can definitely take care of himself in a tough situation. But I don't know if I'd call him a woodsman. Do you think he got lost?"

"Could be. I hope so. These woods can be dangerous. Folks living up here in the hills don't fancy outsiders coming 'round. Usually they keep to themselves, but there's always the possibility Walcott pissed someone off or saw something he wasn't supposed to, and got hisself shot."

"Great. So what's next?" Jackson slapped at a mosquito.

"I'll take Graham and look around a little. You can either tag along or wait with Deputy Stone."

"We'll go," Taylor said without hesitation. "Walcott was a friend. Besides, I need to provide a first-hand report to the boss."

"Suit yourself."

Carson called for Graham and then started toward the woods. "Hope you boys got your bug spray on." He gave a short barking laugh and stuffed more Red Man in his cheek.

****

The morning sun angled through the dense tree branches, creating a green dome

overhead and imparting a soft, pastel feel to everything underneath. Taylor found it hard to correlate the peaceful setting with the possibility of multiple homicides.

Until they found the corpse.

"Over here! We got a body." Officer Graham waved his arm and the others hurried to him. An ancient, wizened face peered up from a covering leaves. The diffuse quality of the light highlighted the contrast between the dried foliage and the gray flesh beneath it.

"Damn." Carson wiped his neck with a stained handkerchief. "Graham. Call Doc Kramer. Tell him to get up here with a full kit."

"Who is it?" Taylor peered over the lieutenant's shoulder.

"Don't know. Sure as hell ain't Walcott, not unless he aged fifty years overnight." Carson stepped away, pulling Taylor with him.

"Now, I'm gonna have to ask you boys to stay back at least twenty feet, so's you don't disturb my crime scene."

Graham rejoined them. "Doc's on his way. I gave Stone our coordinates. He's getting Brady and Cooper to finish at the cabin."

Carson nodded. "Go ahead and clear the leaves some, let's see what we're dealing with."

"Wait a second." Taylor placed a hand on Carson's arm. "Shouldn't you call for a forensics team or something?"

"Son, you're fifty miles from the nearest State Police barracks. Around these parts we're the highway patrol, town police, and crime scene supervisors. Now step aside and let the man do his work." Carson pulled his arm away and turned his back to Taylor.

Graham donned a pair of latex gloves and brushed the leaves away from the corpse, scooping them into a pile nearby.

The gray-blue corpse of an infant lay between the old man's legs.

"Sonofabitch." Carson knelt down and stared at the tiny remains. "What in hell is going on here?"

Forty minutes later, Deputy Stone arrived with an older man who carried a well-worn black leather satchel. Stone set down a large, plastic case labeled 'Crime Scene.'

"Taylor, Jackson, this here's Doc Kramer, town physician and Ashe County Medical Examiner." While Carson performed the introductions, Stone opened

his kit, revealing a variety of sample bags, tiny envelopes, and large black trash bags.

Kramer favored them with a short nod as he pulled on a pair of latex gloves. Tiny, round glasses rode low on a red-veined nose, and he sucked at his teeth as examined the bodies. The wet pop of his dentures sliding in and out sounded obscenely loud in the hushed atmosphere.

The corpse's lips had peeled back in a snarl, exposing a smattering of black, rotted teeth. Large pieces of flesh were missing from the body. Human teeth marks circled the wounds. A ripe, wild odor, very different from rotting flesh, surrounded the corpse.

"Nasty, ain't it?" Kramer waved his hand at the air. "Like sour milk and pig shit left in the sun."

"How long has he been dead?" Jackson held a handkerchief over his nose in a futile attempt to block the stench. The stagnant heat didn't help.

"Not too long, I'd say. Very little decomposition." Kramer poked the body with a finger and sucked his teeth again. "Mmm-hmm. Got yourself a real doozy here, Del."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"The old fellow was strangled." Kramer indicated a semi-circle of bruises around the throat. *Suck-suck.* "Large hands, probably a man's. I bet the lab down to Jefferson might even get prints from them marks."

Kramer turned the baby's head. "No question here. Back of the head's a mess. Crushed by a heavy blow." The doctor sucked his teeth some more, his whiskered cheeks pulling in then puffing out. Graham snapped several photos while the M.E. pulled off his gloves.

"I'm done for now. Ya'll can go ahead and finish up, then I'll take the bodies back to town."

Carson put on his own gloves, knelt down by the body. "He's wearing a school ring." The lieutenant lifted the old man's right hand. "Yale. Didn't that Hendrickson fella go to Yale?"

"Yeah, he did," Taylor said.

"Got a watch, too. A Rolex." Carson slid it off the man's left wrist, turned it over. "Something written here. To Dennis, Happy Anniversary. That mean anything to y'all?"

Jackson nodded. "Dennis Hendrickson. It has to be his."

"But Hendrickson was only fifty-five," Taylor frowned and leaned closer.

“He had a full head of hair and no beard.”

“I’ll take fingerprints and dental imprints, even though the teeth are pretty rotted.” Kramer pulled out one of the heavy body bags from crime scene kit. “Let’s pack ’em up.”

Carson held the bag open while Kramer and Stone slid the two bodies inside. When they finished, he told Stone to help the M.E. bring the bodies out of the woods.

“We’ve still got a few hours of daylight left.” Carson spat, used the back of his hand to wipe red juice from his lips and chin. “I’m of a mind to look around these woods, see what else we turn up. You boys up for that?”

When Taylor and Jackson agreed, he nodded. “Stay close with us.”

After about fifteen minutes of searching, Graham held up a hand.

“There’s a clearing up ahead.” He made to move forward, but Carson placed his arm in front of the officer.

“Y’all smell something?”

Jackson wrinkled his long, aquiline nose. “I still haven’t gotten the odor of those bodies out of my nostrils.”

“You have, you just don’t know it,” Carson kept his voice soft. “This smell’s the same as those bodies. Graham, keep a sharp eye. Something ain’t right here.”

Carson led the others to a stand of hickory trees large enough to hide behind.

“Christ almighty, look at that.”

A man and a woman crouched in front of a broken down shack, digging at the ground with sticks. The man appeared much older than his companion. Both of them were filthy, and only the man wore clothes. The shirt and slacks hung from his thin frame and looked new, despite being torn and dirty.

“Time to get some answers.” Carson undid the strap of his holster but left the gun in place. “Hey, you!” Carson raised his voice and stepped out from the trees.

Both figures stood up. Their eyes grew wide at the sight of the four men.

The woman was noticeably pregnant, her belly heavy and round. Her matted hair and dirt-smeared body gave her a savage, primitive look.

Compared to the man, she was a queen of high society.

Thin to the point of emaciation, he resembled the Japanese soldiers who’d hidden in caves after World War II and never returned to civilization. Long strings of hair hung over his face and his beard was just as ragged.

The man shouted at them, an unintelligible mix of hoots, growls, and grunts.

"All right, quit your hollerin.' We ain't here to hurt you. Just want to talk, is all." Carson held his hands out to the sides, a Jesus in uniform.

In response, the man drew back his lips. Yellow teeth, with several gaps in both rows, gave the appearance of a mouth stuffed with Halloween corn. He approached, shouting and thrusting his broken-branch rapier back and forth.

As the gesticulating figure drew closer, Taylor gasped and pointed.

"Oh, my God. Look. His chin."

Just below his lip a thick, twisted scar angled down and disappeared into the filthy whiskers.

Jackson's face drained of color. "Walcott? That's impossible."

"Who else do you know with a scar like that?"

"We can figure it out later," Carson said. "Everybody back up." He motioned them toward the woods with one hand and drew his gun with the other.

Taylor grabbed Jackson's arm. The other investigator hadn't moved. "Jackson, come on!"

Jackson whirled around, his eyes narrowed to slits and spittle foaming around his lips.

"I'll kill you! The woman is mine!" He lunged at Taylor with hooked fingers. Taylor screamed as Jackson's teeth found purchase in the meaty area between shoulder and neck. Blood spurted out, and Jackson attacked with even greater fury.

Graham paused in his retreat. "Lieutenant?"

Carson opened his mouth to answer. Red madness exploded in his brain.

He raised his gun and pulled the trigger.

****

Deputy Stone had just closed the back door of the M.E.'s worn-out station wagon when the sound of distant gunshots reached them. Two reports in fast succession, followed by three more. Although the terrain made it hard to be sure, Stone felt certain the sounds came from the direction the Lieutenant and Graham had taken.

Kramer looked up from his paperwork and raised an eyebrow. Officers Brady and Cooper dropped their hands to their guns, their expressions

uncertain.

"Shit." Stone thumbed his radio. "Lieutenant, what's the situation? Carson? Graham? Anyone hear me?" Static and dead air came back through the tiny speaker. Stone tried twice more, with the same results.

"Whatcha gonna do?" Kramer sucked his dentures, his rheumy eyes wide and white in the gathering dusk.

Stone shook his head, thumbed the radio again. "Holly? It's Stone. We've got shots fired, out in the woods where Carson and Graham went with those PIs. I'm taking Brady and Cooper to check it out. Call the Staties."

"Roger that," came the reply.

"Doc, get those bodies back to town." Stone headed toward the woods, Brady and Cooper in tow.

Thirty minutes later, pistol shots broke the silence of the night.

****

When the first State Police units arrived, they found a single radio unit on the ground just inside the tree line, and several sets of footprints.

At least two of the sets were barefoot.

****

Deep in the woods, the woman nursed her baby, her belly already swelling again. Nearby, an old man with a scarred chin tore meat from one of the bodies stacked between them.

Soon there would be many mouths to feed.

Slutty Dead Girl

She walked into my office just as I finished my first scotch-and-coffee of the day. Down on the street, yuppies grabbed hot dogs from street vendors while multi-tasking on their Blackberries and iPhones.

"I need your help," she stated, parking her thin-but-not-emaciated body into the aging wooden chair in front of my desk.

I took my time answering her. I wanted to soak in every detail, just in case I never saw her again. I could count on one finger how many times women who looked like runway models showed up in my office.

She wore her long, shiny black hair loose around her shoulders. It was the same shade as her blouse, which was just clingy enough to accentuate her firm, softball-sized breasts. Long, pale legs extended out from her tight leather mini-skirt. All that black contrasted nicely with the milky whiteness of her skin. Her lips were so faded as to be almost colorless. As far as I could see, not a single blemish or freckle marred her sun-deprived beauty.

The only imperfections evident on her classically beautiful face were the bluish smudges under her large, round, azure eyes.

"What can I do for you, Ms...?"

"DeChamps. Prudence DeChamps." She didn't hold out her hand. One point for her. "I need you to find the man who killed me."

My gaze had drifted down to her chest, as if drawn by magnets. Now my eyes returned to her face.

"Excuse me? You seem pretty alive to me, Ms. DeChamps." I wanted to take another look at her breasts, but even I had enough courtesy to wait until after she answered.

"I've been dead ever since the night that bastard took my life away." She pulled a pack of cigarettes from her purse, lit one. Her long, red nails looked freshly polished.

With one quick motion, she pulled up her sleeve and pressed the glowing cigarette tip against her skin. There was just enough time for flesh to sizzle before I lunged over the desk and swatted the butt from her hand.

"What the hell's your problem?" I walked around her and picked up the cigarette, stubbed it out in the ashtray.

No pain showed on her face, just a sad smile curling the corners of her

mouth.

"Proving a point," she said, her voice as emotionless as when she'd introduced herself. "The dead don't feel pain."

"Great." I sat down again, mostly to hide the bulge in my pants that even her unexpected self-mutilation couldn't eliminate. "Next time skip the demonstration." I opened a drawer, poured some more scotch into my coffee cup.

"Do you believe me now?" She rolled her sleeve back down, covering the melted circle of skin with its black, crispy edges.

"I believe you really want to find this guy." I didn't add that I thought she was nuts.

"I want to find him and kill him, the way he killed me. I want to rip his heart out, the same way he tore out mine. I want to leave him a broken, empty shell, the same..."

"The same way he left you." I held up my hand. "I get it. So who's the lucky fellow?"

She dug a piece of paper from her purse. "Roger Gilbride. I also wrote down the bar where I met him, and all the places he took me while we dated."

"Got an address or phone number for him?" I glanced at the list. All the addresses were in the East Village. Trendy, snobby places. Not my usual cup of tea. Then I saw a name I recognized: The Kat Klub. A half-decent topless joint. I made a mental note to start my investigation there.

"He never took me to his place. I had a cell phone number, but it's not working anymore."

I nodded. Typical New York player. Probably lived in the same area where he met her. Even a half-assed drunk like me should be able to find him in a few days.

"Gonna cost a grand," I told her. "That's for one week, including my expenses. Half now, half when I deliver the address."

She looked down at the floor. I knew that look. When they can't meet your eyes, it means they're broke.

"I don't have any money, Mr. Clemente. But I'll do anything to find him." Now she stared me right in the face. "Anything."

"You mean..."

She stood up and walked to my side of the desk, spun my chair around so I was facing her. Before I could say 'boo,' she was on my lap, her tongue in my

mouth, working me like a pro from the red light district. Her lips were cool, as if she'd just finished a cold drink.

I stuck my hands into her midnight-black hair, intending to pull her head away, but instead found myself pushing her down further, until her head was in my lap.

She was good. Better than good. When she finished, she returned to her chair. "Will that do for a down payment?"

I looked at her. Her face wasn't even flushed. Either she did this all the time and it meant nothing to her, or she was one of those broads who just didn't get excited over men.

Right then I knew her waif-like beauty and talented mouth had me hooked.

"It'll do," I told her, trying to act nonchalant.

"Good. I'll be back tomorrow to see what you've found out."

We both stood up. "Is there a number I can reach you at, Ms. DuChamps?"

She paused at the door. "Call me Prudence. I think we're past the formalities. And no, I don't have a number at the moment. I'm staying with...friends."

With that, she walked out.

I stared at the list she'd left me. I suddenly wanted to find this Gilbride fellow. After all, the faster I found him, the faster I could collect the rest of my payment.

And I really wanted that payment.

****

The Kat Klub was still more than half-empty when I paid my five bucks and took a seat at the bar, where I had equally good views of the two dozen or so patrons as well as the atomic-breasted girl on the stage.

The bartender, a slinky brunette whose tube top let me know she wasn't wearing a bra, came over. "Whatchya want?"

I tore my gaze away from her chest. "Scotch, neat." I dropped a ten on the bar. "You know a fellow name of Roger Gilbride?"

"Gilbride? Preppy-looking guy with blonde hair?"

That matched Prudence's description. "Yeah. See him around lately?"

"Nope. Only comes in on Saturdays, around one or so. Likes to hit on the

dancers. I've seen him leave with a few."

"A real charmer?"

"His wallet has all the charm. But in here that's all you need." She pocketed my ten and went on to the next customer.

I smiled as I sipped my scotch. Tomorrow was Saturday. All I had to do was bring Prudence here, and case closed.

A lap dance girl strolled by, wearing nothing but stiletto heels and a see-through pink negligee with matching g-string. Skinny, with long black hair. She reminded me of Prudence. I waved her down with a twenty.

Two seconds later her soft flesh was brushing my face as she ground herself against me. I closed my eyes, picturing Prudence's body riding me.

That image stayed with me long after I left the club.

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Prudence DuChamps strolled in just after 4 p.m. on Saturday, this time dressed in a simple black T-shirt and faded jeans. A wispy scarf was tied artfully around her neck.

"Found him yet?"

I leaned back in my chair, put my feet up on the cluttered desk. "Found him? How's this? I know exactly where he'll be at one-thirty tonight. Still want to confront him in person?"

"Yes. Tell me where."

"Sorry, it doesn't work that way. We go together. Gotta make sure he doesn't get stupid, try to hurt you."

She raised one eyebrow. "You mean, you want to make sure I don't try to skip out on what I owe you. Don't worry, I'm good for it."

I decided to press my luck. "Maybe you should give me another advance."

She nodded. "Whatever. Open your pants."

A moment later she was between my legs again. I tried to slip my hand inside her shirt, but she swatted it away.

Three minutes later I was done and she stood up. "I'll meet you here at midnight." Before I could say anything, she was out the door.

A pang of guilt rumbled in my stomach. As much as I'd enjoyed myself, she'd just as obviously hated it. If I had any decency, I'd tell her to forget the

rest of her bill.

Of course, no one ever said I was the decent type.

****

I ushered Prudence into the Kat Klub just after midnight. I'd offered her the chance to wait in the car, but she'd never hesitated.

"Trust me, it's not my first time in a strip joint."

I figured she was playing tough. I mean, she definitely had the body to be a stripper, with those long, thin legs and stacked chest, but her clothes and attitude screamed 'frigid,' and you rarely saw that type swinging on a pole.

However, the way she marched through the smoky air, unaffected by the pounding music or the dozens of thin-waisted, silicon-enhanced dancers, made me reconsider my opinion of her.

Prudence led the way to a small cocktail table at the back of the wide, dark room. I ordered us a couple of scotches from the waitress, a tiny thing in a mini skirt.

"Now what?" Prudence pushed her glass back and forth across the table.

"We wait. The bartender said Gilbride comes in around one or so." I sipped my scotch. "Remember. Tell me when you see him. Don't talk to him or even let him know you're here."

"Relax. I won't start any trouble."

She slipped out of her black leather jacket. Underneath, she wore the same shirt and scarf she'd had on earlier, this time paired with black cotton stretch pants and black heels. Something tugged at my brain, something about her arms, bone-white under the black lights. I almost had it, but then a voice interrupted me.

"You folks lookin' for a dance?"

The southern drawl pulled my attention away. I looked up and found my eyes even with a huge pair of tanned breasts, which led back to a blonde whose curves put Pam Anderson to shame.

"I..."

"Yeah, he wants a dance." Prudence slid her scotch to the girl. "Drink up, and keep him entertained."

She returned her gaze to the bar, a cigarette between her lips.

I pulled out a twenty. “Do what the lady says.”

Who was I to turn down a lap dance while another hot chick watched? Maybe she got off on watching. It sure didn’t seem like it, though.

Prudence remained expressionless while my dancer, Sugar, ground herself against me and jiggled herself against my face and chest. Glitter sparkled like stars on her skin, and I could only imagine how much of it had gotten on me already.

Halfway through my fourth dance, Prudence sat up straight, dropping the latest in a non-stop string of cigarettes. Her face had twisted into a mask of hatred.

“He’s here.”

I leaned past Sugar. Gilbride was just taking a seat at the bar.

Prudence stood up. “Bastard’s gonna pay.” She started for the bar.

“Sorry, Sugar, gotta go.” I pushed her off my lap and dropped four twenties on the table.

I caught Prudence before she got halfway to the bar. “I told you, not in here.”

“Let go of me!” She pulled from my grasp, the strength in her chill, wiry body surprising me.

“Listen, unless you want to spend the night in jail, we wait for him in the car.”

She hesitated.

“The bouncers won’t let anything happen in the club. Outside, they don’t care. You can scream at him all night long.”

She headed for the door. “I’m going to kill him.” Her voice was colder than her skin.

“Whatever.” I’d heard it all before, from men and women. Nevertheless, I made sure my snub-nosed .38 was in place against my left ribs before I got in the car. On the off chance Gilbride decided to get physical, I was prepared.

We didn’t have long to wait. Prudence had just finished her third cigarette when Gilbride came out, his arm around a tall, curvy, oriental dancer, who I recognized from the acrobatic pole dance she’d done earlier in the evening.

“He got a thing for dancers?” Maybe that explained her problem with him.

“He always did.”

She caught me by surprise again, opening the door and taking off across the parking lot.

“Shit!” I ran after her. She called out Gilbride’s name.

He and the dancer stopped, looked over at us. Even from thirty feet away, I could see the way his face went pale, as if Prudence was the most dangerous person on earth. He let go of the dancer and sprinted towards a brand new BMW.

Even in her high heels, Prudence managed to reach Gilbride before he could open the car door.

"Help me!" His falsetto scream seemed out of character, considering he outweighed Prudence by at least a hundred pounds. I slowed down, looking forward to watching a macho stud beg for forgiveness.

I don't think he would have had a chance even if I'd been right next to him.

Prudence leaped on him, driving him back against the car. His scream cut off in a garbled, choking gasp as she bit into his throat. A fountain of blood sprayed out from the wound, ink-black in the greenish glare of the parking lot lamps.

My feet refused to move as I watched her spit out a chunk of flesh and start tearing at the wound with her fingers, ripping the hole larger and larger.

"How does it feel to be dead, asshole? How does it feel?"

Her shouts echoed across the parking lot, and I realized we only had a few minutes before someone called the cops. I looked around for the dancer who'd been with Gilbride, but she was nowhere to be found.

That meant we had no time at all.

"Prudence! Let go! We've got to get out of here!" I grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her off Gilbride's body. She kicked and screamed a few times, then seemed to realize who I was. I hustled her to my car and drove away, leaving the lights off in case someone tried to catch my license plate.

Once we hit the highway, I flicked the lights on and slowed to the legal limit. Only then did I find my voice.

"Jesus Christ, what the hell were you thinking? You killed him!"

"Now we're even."

I looked over at her. Wet blood covered her face, arms, and chest. More was smeared on my car seat. Her eyes were wide and white, but she wasn't breathing heavy.

"I'll take you to my place, clean you up, and we'll call a lawyer I know. Christ, this is some fucked-up mess."

She stayed silent the rest of the ride home, while I tried to figure out how I could come out of this without being an accessory to murder.

At my house, I made sure she didn't touch anything as I led her to the bathroom. I turned the shower on full blast. My only thought was to wash away all the evidence.

I was rubbing the tacky blood off her when it hit me.

There was no scar on her arm.

Not a single mark where just two days before she'd burned herself.

"You finally noticed." Her voice was cold as the grave.

I looked into her face. She gave me a small smile and pulled off her shirt, exposing the wide, jagged Y-shaped scar down the center of her chest.

"I told you he killed me. You can't hurt something that's already dead."

****

After giving her one of my shirts to wear, I locked her in the basement, telling her it was for her own safety. She didn't object. Then I went to the spare room that serves as my home office, and did an Internet search on Prudence DeChamps, something I should've done two days ago, except I'd been thinking with the wrong head.

I found the story right away.

"Prudence DeChamps, age twenty-six, strangled to death in her apartment six months ago. Police have no leads. Prudence, a topless dancer, also had a record for prostitution." The picture showed a blonde girl with a lot more makeup and dark red lips, but there was no mistaking it was the same person who'd just killed someone in front of me.

I stopped reading and went downstairs.

She was waiting for me on her knees when I opened the door.

"I guess it's time for me to pay up."

I thought fast.

"Sorry, babe. The price just went up. It's gonna cost you a lot more for me to keep your secret." I undid my pants as I moved forward.

Prudence gave me one of her half-smiles. "Whatever you say. It was worth any price." She lifted the shirt over her head, exposing herself to me, scar and all.

I went to her, not caring she was a whore.

A dead whore.

She was still the best I'd ever had.

Afterwards, I locked the door again. And made a mental note to buy some chains.

I didn't intend to end up like Gilbride.

Martial Law

The end of the world came not with a whimper or a bang, but with a stench of corruption and the sound of marching feet.

Of course, the world hasn't actually come to an end. People still go to work, raise their children, and buy pizzas on Friday night instead of cooking.

But so many other things are different. So much has changed—and not for the better—that for those of us who were around before The Change it's as if the world we knew was replaced by something born from the hellish imagination of a crazed mental patient.

I was fifteen when it happened, sitting with my father in the old ice cream parlor on Main Street. Halfway through my vanilla-chocolate swirl cone, somebody screamed.

"What the hell's going on out there?" asked Mr. Hastings, the portly owner of Tasty Kone.

Like the rest of the patrons I got up and looked out the wide front window. At first, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Then I realized there were more people than usual on the sidewalks, all of them staring down the street towards the center of town.

Mr. Hastings went outside, and a few people followed him, including me and my father.

"Hey, it's a parade," someone shouted.

I stood on tip-toe to see and sure enough, here came lines of people marching down Main Street, all of them dressed in what appeared to be military uniforms.

Only problem was, no one was expecting a parade.

Cars veered left and right, and I saw more than a couple of fender benders as drivers tried unsuccessfully to avoid oncoming traffic or parked cars. The shrieks of metal scraping metal and shattering glass joined the blaring of car horns and alarms. The marching men ignored all of this and kept right on walking, backs straight, guns on their shoulders, in perfect military ranks.

That's when it hit me—there was no music. What kind of parade has no music? While I pondered this another person screamed and people began to point and shout. More than a few spectators turned and ran away, including Mr. Hastings. I heard my dad say, "Oh, my God." Then he grabbed me by the

shoulders and turned me back towards the Tasty Kone. “Inside, quick!”

I started to object—after all, I was fifteen—but the look on my father’s face stopped me from speaking, and I let him push me towards the open door. The only time I’d ever seen him look like that was when he’d gotten the news about Mom’s car accident. As soon as we were inside he shut the door and turned the lock.

A barrage of questions hit us as the people in the shop demanded to know what was happening, but my father ignored them. He told me to get behind the counter and then started pushing one of the plastic and metal booths towards the door.

It was obvious he was terrified of something, something he didn’t want coming in after us. But what? My mind immediately turned to terrorists. Maybe those marching soldiers hadn’t been Americans? The idea of another attack on our soil wasn’t farfetched, not even to a teen like me. Kids my age had been just as stunned by the events of September 11th as anyone else.

Something came to life inside me. Not patriotism, not heroism, but a desire to stand by my father when he needed me. I ran to him and together we dragged three booths against the door, setting the third atop the other two.

All the while, the two counter girls and the six or seven customers kept shouting questions at us, louder and louder, until I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Shut up!” I screamed. “Shut up! Shut up!”

Surprisingly, they did.

My dad put a hand on my shoulder and faced the people now staring at us. “Something’s happening outside,” he said, his voice trembling just a little. “Something really bad. We need to hide or we won’t be safe.”

“What is it?” asked an older woman, clutching the hand of a small boy.

“I…I don’t know,” my father said, but the look on his face told me he was lying.

He scooted me around the counter and we ducked low, peering through the fingerprint-smudged glass of the ice cream bin. After a moment, the other customers took cover as well, some hiding behind the ice cream area like us, others over by the cash register. One of the counter girls, a cute redhead who wasn’t much older than me, picked up the phone behind the counter and tried calling 911. A moment later she slammed it down.

“Dammit! All lines are busy.”

Several people pulled out cell phones, but all they got were messages saying

their calls couldn't be completed at that time.

By then the shouting outside had grown so loud I could hear it through the door. People were running in all directions, their forms flashing in chaotic fashion past the wide, darkly-tinted window. A few tried to open the door to our makeshift haven, their faces twisted in fear as they peered inside, but when it wouldn't budge, they turned and ran off instead of pounding on it to be let in.

That scared me more than anything, that the people outside were so terrified they felt they had to get to safety as fast as possible. I hadn't heard any gunshots or explosions, so why was everyone so frightened?

Then I felt the first rumblings through the floor. It was a deep, low vibration, like when a nearby car is playing rap music through giant speakers and the bass pulsates through the ground and up into your body.

Only this wasn't rap. It was the *stomp-thump-stomp* of marching feet, and the entire street trembled with it.

I peered through the counter and saw them, my first glimpse of things to come.

At first I thought my imagination was running away from me. The creatures I'd thought were men couldn't possibly exist. Not for real. But there they were, marching down Main in perfect military formation. The uniforms that had appeared neat and pressed from a distance were anything but. Dirt and grime coated them, and a good many were torn and ragged, stained with black and gray mold.

A few marchers wore helmets or hats. However, enough of them were bare-headed so I could see the way the skin hung in flaps from their skulls, the way noses and lips were half-gone or completely missing. Most of the undead things—for that's what they were—had no eyes. The ones that did, well, their deflated, yellowish-red orbs stared straight ahead, leaking thick fluids down rotting cheeks.

Row after row of the marching dead went past. I lost count somewhere around a hundred, only because that was when the stench finally found its way into the building. It was the sickly-sweet, meaty stink of dead animals left to rot on the highway in the hot summer sun, their bloated bodies bursting from the pressure of pent-up gasses.

One by one we started coughing and gagging, and I feared the monsters would hear us. As I struggled not to vomit, my dad came to the rescue again. He flipped up the lid to the ice cream case, and the scent of those sweet

desserts dulled the impact of that horrible odor just enough to keep me from spewing up my lunch.

A young woman, who looked to be around twenty, started crying. The man beside her motioned for her to shush, then pinched her arm when she continued to sob. She glared at him but stayed silent after that.

Outside, the undead army kept walking past, slow and steady, giving us time to study them. Not all their uniforms were the same. I saw Army, Navy, Air Force, and even Marines represented. Other uniforms I couldn't recognize at all because they were little more than blue and red tatters hanging off skeletal remains. Some of the creatures carried guns—shiny, new weapons completely at odds with their moldering uniforms. Others marched empty handed.

Aside from their marching feet, none of them made a sound.

Things might have ended peacefully, at least for those of us cowering along Main Street, but then the cavalry showed up.

We didn't see them, not at first. In fact, it wasn't until we heard the gunshots that we even knew would-be rescuers had arrived. Someone must have clued them in as to what they were fighting, because there were no commands shouted over megaphones, no warnings to stop. Just a sudden torrent of gunfire that was so unexpected most everyone behind the counter cried out, including me.

The dead soldiers reacted instantly. Those with guns swiftly took aim and returned fire. For the next few minutes, the dead and the living traded a volley of gunfire that created such a din I couldn't hear myself think.

Screams rose above the shattering of glass and the metallic whine of ricochets, and I said a silent prayer that none of the rounds would find our hiding place. Visions of me or my dad struck by a stray bullet and sent spinning in a bloody waltz filled my head. I had to clamp my legs together to keep from pissing my pants.

As the minutes passed, the volume of the gunfire receded a few decibels, and I saw the hellish soldiers moving away from our portion of the road.

"Stay here," my father whispered. Still in a crouch, he crab-walked around the counter and over to the window. Lifting his head slightly, he peeked out through the one-way glass.

I chewed my knuckles, sure that at any moment one of the creatures would smash through and steal him from me, the way the drunk driver had stolen my mother. But nothing happened, and after a minute my dad stood up and came

back to me.

"What's going on?" an old man asked. He was crouched on the floor with the old lady and the little boy.

My dad shook his head, his face pale and drawn. "The police and what looks like the National Guard are fighting back, but…they're losing. Those things…bullets don't seem to be killing them. But our people are dying. It looks like a battlefield out there." He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, then seemed to realize the effect of his words. He took a deep breath and offered something positive.

"The good news is that if we wait a little longer they'll be past us and we should be able to get the hell out of here."

Just then the young woman's cell phone rang. The tinny sound of Beethoven's Fifth made all of us jump.

"Holy shit," I said, forgetting my father's edict against swearing. In all the confusion I'd forgotten about my cell phone. I pulled mine out and dialed 911, but all I got was a busy signal. Even the internet refused to connect. Other people tried theirs and got the same results as before. We stared at the young woman, but she shook her head.

"A voicemail message from my boss. I tried calling back, but…" She let the sentence trail off.

I didn't say anything, but I knew my father had to be worried about my sister, Cassie. She'd moved out of the house just a few months earlier and rented an apartment in the city with two of her friends.

I tried her number next, got the same result.

"We have to get home," Dad said. "We'll find out what's happening on the radio, or television."

I nodded. I was more than ready to get as far away from those monsters as possible.

My father went to the window and checked outside again, then signaled me to join him. "We'll wait here, keep an eye on things. As soon as it looks clear we'll run for the car."

The two of us crouched there, peeking through the window or door and watching the gruesome events unfolding on the other side of the glass.

Main Street resembled downtown Beirut during an attack. Smoke filled the air and the rapid fire of automatic weapons made it sound like God had turned the town into some sort of gigantic popcorn maker. From my awkward vantage

point I saw the flashing lights of police cars and emergency vehicles far off to the left, well down Main, near the low building that housed the courthouse and the Mayor's office.

The police and Guard had taken up a defensive stance in front of the building, the officers and soldiers using cars, trucks, and riot shields for protection as they fired over and over at the oncoming monsters—I knew well enough what they were, but my mind refused to let my mouth say the z-word, as if keeping it in my brain would increase the chances that all this might be a dream.

None of their efforts had any effect on the attacking forces.

The long lines of supernatural fighters hid most of what was happening, but evidence of how the living had tried to fight back was all over the street. Bodies littered the road and sidewalks, their blue, green, and camouflage uniforms drenched in red. Many of the dead looked as if they'd been torn apart by wild animals, and I remembered that not all of the creatures had been carrying guns; more than a few must have used their hands and teeth as weapons.

I counted twelve cops and double that number in Guardsmen before I couldn't take it anymore and had to look away. Just the thought of dying that way, some freakish thing from the grave digging its bony fingers into my flesh…

I got up and ran for the bathroom, barely making it to the toilet before I threw up. Once my stomach emptied, dry heaves took over and it was a while before I felt strong enough to return to my father's side. As bad as things were, being next to him made them a little more bearable.

"You okay?" he asked as I knelt beside him.

"Yeah." And it was true. I mean, I wasn't okay, but it was like I'd puked up more than just a sandwich and ice cream. It felt like I'd released some of my fear and denial, enough at least to accept the insane events happening outside. More importantly, I could hold myself together so my father would be proud of me.

Dad must have sensed the change in me because he clapped his hand on my shoulder and said, "Good. You keep an eye on things to the right, so nothing sneaks up on us, and I'll watch the left, where the fighting is."

I nodded and took up my position. I don't know if he thought I'd be better off staring at just a few bodies in the street rather than watching the monsters, or if

he just trusted his own eyes better. Either way I was happy to be helping. Of course, after a few minutes of looking at the unmoving corpses, I started to change my mind. Especially when the flies and birds noticed the free buffet spread out on the street.

I tried not to watch the way the crows pecked and pulled at the dead flesh. Thoughts swirled in my head. What the hell was going on? Where did those… things come from? No sooner did the questions cross my mind than a memory sparked to life.

The uniforms—blue, red, gray. I remembered pictures I'd seen in history books and during field trips to museums. *Some of the creatures had been wearing Revolutionary War or Civil War uniforms.* And the marching soldiers had come from the south side of town where the public cemetery was located. Some of the graves there dated back to the 1700s. They even had a whole section dedicated to veterans.

I considered mentioning this to my dad, but just then something caught my eye. Movement, directly in front of the store. A corpse in a green uniform—one of the National Guardsmen who'd been fighting the monsters—twitched, sending two crows flapping into the sky.

As I watched, the body slowly moved its arms and legs and pushed itself to a sitting position. Nearby, other corpses began doing the same. I tried to say something, but all that came out was a choking gasp.

"What?" my father asked, his voice carrying the same distracted tone he used if I happened to ask him a question during a ballgame. He was still looking left, his attention on the battle outside.

I swallowed, then tried again. "Look!"

He glanced at me and I pointed out the window.

"Holy shit," he whispered.

Someone behind us—I think the girl with the cell phone—screamed. I guess they'd been watching from their hiding places too.

Somehow, the bullet-riddled bodies were coming to life. One by one they stood, checked their weapons, and then started down the road, following their new battle mates. One of them stumbled over its own intestines; it paused just long enough to rip away the offending organs and cast them to the ground.

Someone behind the counter threw up, causing my own stomach to rumble again, but I managed to keep my guts under control. Somebody else started shouting, *"No! No!"* over and over.

One of the newly risen corpses turned and looked right at the store. It took several steps towards the door and my father grabbed me, holding me with one arm while he pushed us backwards, his feet sliding on the linoleum. The soldier, its battle greens stained with blood and riddled with bullet holes, stopped when it was about two feet from the door. Its eyes were lifeless, empty of all expression.

It opened its mouth in a silent scream and shook its rifle at us.

That's when my brief attempt at bravery deserted me, and I passed out.

****

We ended up spending the night in the ice cream shop. To this day I've yet to eat ice cream again. In the morning, my dad and one of the other adults checked outside and reported back to the rest of us that the undead were still gathered in front of the Town Hall, but the shooting had stopped.

That was when my father decided it was time to leave.

"It doesn't look like anyone's coming to the rescue, so it's up to us to get out of here. Who's with me?" He looked around at the other people in the store, but no one said anything.

"Suit yourselves." He turned to me. "When I open the door you run like hell for the car, got it?"

I said yes. I didn't want to spend another second in that place. We went to the door, and he counted to three before flinging it open.

"Go!"

And I did. At least for the first ten feet or so. Then my brain began to process my environment and my feet stopped working.

Main Street looked like an end-of-the-world disaster movie. Cars sat abandoned in the street, some with their engines still running and their doors open. Others had driven into buildings or into each other. Steam rose from crushed radiators and broken hoses, and I noticed that a few of the vehicles still had bodies—unmoving—in them.

Nobody was out on the streets or sidewalks except my father and I, unless you counted the couple of dozen civilian bodies littering the road.

"Dad, how come only the soldiers—"

"Brandon! C'mon!" He grabbed my shirt and dragged me forward, sending

my nearly formed thought sliding back to my subconscious. I stumbled alongside him to our car.

The old Chevy had somehow avoided demolition, and as soon we slid into our seats my father started it up and sent it barreling down Main, heading away from the dead army and towards home.

We hadn't gone more than four blocks when I saw people again—real people, living people—emerging from hiding places. A couple tried to flag us down, but Dad kept the gas pedal mashed to the floor.

I turned on the radio and scrolled through the stations. All I got for my efforts was one Emergency Broadcast signal after another. That may have been when I started to cry. I'm not sure. All I know is that by the time we got home, I was bawling like a little baby. My dad threw the car into "PARK," and I thought he was going to tell me to stop it, that this was no time to cry.

Instead, he put his arms around me and hugged me to his chest.

Somehow, that was worse. The idea that I wasn't man enough to handle things, that my dad had to comfort me like a girl, pissed me off. I pulled away and dried my face. He must have seen the change in my expression because he just nodded and got out of the car. As soon as we were inside, I ran for the television.

At first, I thought we'd be out of luck. All the regular stations were showing the Emergency Broadcast symbol and putting out that damned, high-pitched beep. However, CNN was still broadcasting, its cameras panning silently across the front of the White House and down Pennsylvania Avenue.

Hundreds, *thousands* of bodies filled the roads and sidewalks. Amidst the corpses, soldiers and police fought to stave off oncoming zombies, but the walking dead simply overwhelmed them. Those that didn't have weapons used their teeth and hands to kill and maim.

As I watched, I noticed the same thing I'd seen in our own town. "Dad, how come the soldiers are coming back to life, but no one else is?"

"I don't know," he whispered. "I don't know."

****

It was two more days before the President made his announcement, two days of complete anarchy around the country. In every town and city, dead veterans and

soldiers rose up and marched en mass to the nearest government buildings. They killed anyone who tried to stop them and ignored everyone else.

Each time a soldier or veteran died during the brief coup, they rose up again minutes later, adding to the ranks of the zombie militia. Finally, the order was given to stop shooting them.

The President's speech was short and to the point. The undead had one demand, and he acquiesced to it: turning over command of the armed forces to the zombies. They immediately installed a council of dead generals, including decayed notables such as Grant, Patton and MacArthur, to oversee America's military.

Their goal appeared to be a simple one: no more weakness on the part of the United States. The conflicts in the Middle East, the threat of continued terrorism, the lack of support from our allies, somehow all of it had combined to bring them back, their corpses animated by the sheer force of their patriotism.

Within days, the face of the US military around the world changed from benevolent protector of democracy to the hellish visage of righteous force. The dead installed a mandatory draft, with all able-bodied adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five required to complete two years of service.

Then the real fighting began.

It took three weeks to overwhelm Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan. Syria fell a week later. Our troops acted swiftly and mercilessly, using undefeatable strategies and the latest hi-tech weapons. Rather than face our wrath, the rest of the Middle East quickly enacted new laws to capture and turn over any suspected terrorists to American troops for immediate execution.

Naturally, there were outcries from around the world. The UN held several meetings to discuss sanctions, but it didn't matter. Overnight the US Armed Forces had more than quadrupled in size and become nearly indestructible. Even overseas, any American soldier who was killed immediately rose up to continue fighting. Other countries threatened to retaliate with nukes; however, in the end, it turned out to be only blustering on their part. After all, a nuclear war would not only put an end to the United States, but every other country as well.

After a few tense months, the rest of the world realized we weren't out to take over the globe, just make it safe for ourselves. Our allies remained our allies, and enemy countries either gave up their hostilities or quickly learned

you couldn't fight the dead and win.

By the time I graduated high school only a few countries continued to oppose the United States. I did my two years of military service in South America, slogging through Venezuelan jungles. Unlike the desert, we hadn't been able to bomb the shit out of the South American troops. Apparently, even zombies knew better than to wipe out the rainforests or destroy the big three exports: petroleum, coffee, and cocoa, so we mostly fought a ground war.

Unlike a lot of others, I made it back alive. A year after I got back, my father had a heart attack and died. A veteran of the Gulf War, he rose up five minutes later and walked out of the house without a passing glance at me.

I haven't seen him since.

I've been home for seven years now and, like most people, I've accepted the new America. Life still goes on. I've got a girlfriend; on Saturday nights we go to the movies or grab dinner down at O'Donnell's Bar and Grill.

In fact, in some ways, things have never been better. No one worries about things like 9/11 happening again, or about some crazy dictator deciding to lob a bomb at us. Twelve years of military dominance is enough to give any country a feeling of safety.

Or make them complacent.

That's why the report I saw on this morning's computer feed worries me. A Chinese news agency reported sightings of dead soldiers marching just outside Shanghai.

Wearing Chinese uniforms.

The Toll

Armund stared at the roadway.

I can make it.

He clenched his fists. The words sounded hollow, unable to convince him to take that first step, to complete the challenge.

More than anything, he wanted to turn around and go home, back to the safety of his room. But he knew he couldn't; once he'd accepted the challenge posed by his elder sisters, he had no choice but to go through with it.

They both did it. So can I.

Children weren't allowed to cross the road; he knew that, just like he knew how much trouble he would be in if he got caught. Crouched low in the brush, Armund weighed possible punishment against the endless taunts of his sisters.

He fixed his eyes on the ribbon they'd left for him on the other side. All he had to do was run across, grab it, and run back. Mother and Father didn't have to know.

Taking a deep breath, he stood up.

****

Halfway from Green River to Salina, Ethan Carroll released a sigh of relief as Route 70 finally wound its way out of the torturous plateaus and mountains. The straight road was a welcome respite from the nerve-wracking turns and switchbacks they'd had to deal with all afternoon.

Even better, they were only a few hours from the lodge he'd reserved for their vacation.

Two weeks. He shook his head. The last time he'd had more than a day off had been for their honeymoon. Finishing his surgical residency had meant spending more nights at the hospital than at home. That's why he'd chosen somewhere quiet and secluded for their vacation. He and Kelli needed time to reconnect. He knew too many doctors with failed marriages; he didn't intend to be one of them. And he was positive Kelli would love the lodge; he'd chosen it specifically because it offered a full vegetarian menu, something she always had trouble finding when they went away.

"Wake up, sleepyhead." He nudged Kelli with the side of his hand. "Check this out."

"Oh, my God," his wife murmured as she opened her eyes and squinted into the afternoon sun. "It's beautiful."

For once, Ethan had to agree. The lowering sun hovered just above the mountaintops, its reddish-orange glow turning the landscape into a mélange of radiant hues ranging from brick-red to fiery copper.

"Who knew Utah could look like this?" he asked.

"Some of the pictures I've seen – *look out!"*

Kelli's shout brought his attention back to the road just in time to see something dart out from the high weeds, its body silhouetted by the setting sun.

Ethan slammed on the brakes. The figure froze in midstep, its head turned towards the SUV, eyes widening in terror.

The twin screams of the tires and his wife assailed Ethan's ears as he gave the wheel a desperate turn, closed his eyes, and ducked.

Something thumped against the bumper and an unearthly wail filled the air. Ethan raised his head, expecting to find an animal plastered across his hood. Instead, he saw they were hurtling towards the sloping ground on the opposite side of the road.

This time he hit the brake with both feet. The truck slewed sideways and he did his best to aim for a spot with no trees or rocks. In the next instant, the Highlander left the road, tossing them from their seats and sending coffee cups and maps flying.

Ethan's head struck the wheel and his vision went dim. Kelli's voice faded into the distance. He tried to reach out for her, but his arms refused to move.

Then the world went black.

****

When Ethan opened his eyes, the chaotic din of the accident was gone, replaced by a silence broken only by the *tick-ticking* of the stalled engine and his heartbeat pounding in his ears.

Ignoring his aching head, Ethan turned to Kelli, who lay slumped against the passenger door. Her blonde hair was in tousled disarray and highlighted crimson in the burning glow of the setting sun.

"Kelli? Can you hear me?" He gave her shoulder a shake.

She didn't answer, and for a moment he thought the worst. "Kelli?" he asked in a louder voice. "Kelli, wake up!"

Relief flooded through him as she opened her eyes and let out a low moan.

He touched her face. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I think so." She brushed her hair from her eyes. "What did we hit?"

Ethan leaned back and exhaled slowly. An image flashed inside his head. Just before the impact. A face. Something alien, its features twisted and distorted.

"I don't know. Something big...a bear, maybe," he said. "I should go see. I have to check the car, too."

Kelli twisted around in her seat to look. "Is it dead? It wasn't...a person, was it?" Her summer tan had drained away, leaving pale flesh broken only by a scattering of freckles.

He wanted to say no, wanted to reassure her, but the memory of that bizarre face blocked the words. He glanced out the back window. A hundred feet behind them, a large, dark shape lay motionless on the road.

"Whatever it was, it's not moving. "I'll be right back."

Kelli nodded, her face growing even more ashen.

Ethan exited the SUV and walked around to the front. The nose was buried in a patch of thick brush, and one front tire was down in a ditch, but it didn't look too bad.

Definitely still drivable, he thought, doing his best to ignore the patch of blood and fur on the corner of the bumper.

Returning to the driver's window, he reached in and turned the key, saying a silent prayer the engine would start. Stuck on the highway in the middle of nowhere wasn't high on his wish list of vacation experiences.

Neither is going to jail for vehicular manslaughter.

The engine started on the first try and he let out a breath he hadn't even realized he'd been holding. "Wait here."

"What if...?"

He shrugged. "Only one way to know. If it's an animal, we'll keep going. If not...we'll still be okay. It wasn't our fault."

He walked away before Kelli could say anything else. Technically, it was his fault. He'd taken his eyes off the road. But he wasn't going to admit that to a cop. Or a judge.

Ethan smelled the thing, whatever it was, long before he reached it. Its barnyard, gamey stink filled the air, overpowering the lingering acrid smell of burnt rubber. As he got closer, he found himself holding one arm across his nose and mouth just so he could breathe. He paused, taking his first real look at it.

Long ropes of coarse fur, shading from dark brown to black, covered the body, which had a definite bear-like look to it from the back. It lay facing away from him, its limbs splayed out from the bulky torso. Something pink hung across the midsection, and Ethan felt a twinge of regret when he saw that it was a loop of intestine spilling from the creature's torn abdomen. The arms and legs were massive but short, much like the body itself, which would have been about four feet tall if standing.

He went around to the other side and stopped.

Oh, no. It's not possible. That face!

It was the same ominous face he'd seen just before he closed his eyes. A large, proboscoid nose, the size of a small eggplant, protruded from the bruised and scraped visage. The mouth was wide, with flattened lips. Two eyes, oddly small compared to the rest of the features, resided beneath a heavy brow ridge and thick eyebrows. Ethan was sure he could have convinced himself it was some type of monkey or ape, except for the leather moccasin on one wide, oversized foot and the bone knife hanging from the leather belt around its waist.

One dark-skinned hand twitched, and an eye, black as the coming night, opened. Ethan stepped back.

Something touched his shoulder.

He cried out and jumped away, expecting to see another of the grotesque creatures.

Kelli stood there, looking like she might puke. "What is it?"

"I don't know." But he knew enough to be scared. He knew it was bipedal, and intelligent, and not human. Worse, he knew it was his fault the creature – he couldn't bring himself to call it a person – lay on the road, its body broken and torn.

The creature let out a low moan and closed its eye again.

"Ethan. It's...it's alive."

"I know. We have to get help."

He pulled out his cell phone. No signal. *Of course; we're in the middle of*

nowhere. Right where you'd need a signal the most. Now what do we do?

The creature moaned again, and Ethan knew there was only one option.

"Get back to the truck," he told his wife.

"But what about...?"

"We're taking it with us."

"What? Are you crazy? We're not taking that thing anywhere."

"We can't leave it here. It's hurt, maybe dying."

"Look at it," Kelli said, her voice growing shrill. "It's got a knife, Ethan. Whatever it is, could be dangerous."

"Kelli." He took her by both arms. "I swore an oath to save lives."

"People, not...not *things*."

"I can't leave it here to die," he said. "We'll bring it to the first town we come to, and let the police handle it."

Her eyes wide and frightened, Kelli shook her head. "I have a really bad feeling about this."

****

They'd only driven five miles when Kelli pointed ahead of them. "Look! There's a town up ahead."

"Can't be," Ethan said. "There's nothing on the map for at least thirty miles." But there it was, a hand-made sign proclaiming 'Bergtagna 1 mile.'

By now, Ethan was beginning to wonder if maybe he should have listened to Kelli and left the beast behind. In the near-darkness, the woods seemed to be alive with shifting shadows, and he couldn't shake the thought that they were surrounded by horrific creatures just waiting to devour unwary travelers.

It had taken twenty minutes to hoist the creature into the back of the SUV, and then carefully push its intestines back into the body and wrap a sweatshirt around its midsection to serve as a crude dressing. The thing had remained silent the entire time; on several occasions, Ethan had paused to make sure its heart was still beating.

"Just take the exit." Kelli had wrapped two sweaters around herself to combat the frigid air blowing through the truck. They'd had to open all the windows to avoid getting sick from the monster's stink. "I want to get rid of that thing."

When the turnoff came up, Ethan found himself following a rough-paved exit ramp that looked like it hadn't been used in years. The pot-holed road led them into the center of a diminutive town. Small, neat shops extended down the street in an orderly fashion. A single cross-street ran east to west, populated by an assortment of vaguely European-looking cottages overdone in decorative woodwork.

Ethan parked in front of Roy's General Store, one of the few buildings whose lights were still on. Aside from themselves, the street was empty of people or cars.

"It's like a ghost town." Kelli said, taking a tight grip on his hand.

The darkening sky surrounded the tiny village in a purple curtain as Ethan searched the street for a police station or doctor's office. Seeing nothing, he pointed to the store. "Let's see if they have a phone we can use."

Roy's was a throwback to a simpler time. Long shelves and tables filled the store, every surface piled high with an astounding variety of goods, from canned foods and potato chips to denim jackets, jeans, and an assortment of knit hats.

Near the back of the store, an old man occupied a hand-made rocking chair. He wore denim overalls over a flannel shirt, and had a long, gray beard, the kind popular among Amish men. He was busy trying to light a well-worn pipe.

"Hi, there," Ethan said as they approached.

The bearded man nodded. "Evening."

Certainly not talkative. "Can you help us? We had an accident a few miles back and we need to use a phone. My cell isn't working."

"No service 'round here," the man said in a slow, deliberate fashion. "But there's a phone over there." He pointed his pipe towards a cluttered counter.

"Thanks." Ethan headed for the phone.

"What kind of trouble you have?"

"We hit something on the highway," Kelli said.

The man stopped rocking. "Some thing?"

She nodded. "It was big. And hairy."

"How big?"

"Big as a bear," Ethan said as he dialed.

"Did you kill it?"

Kelli shook her head. "I don't think so."

The man turned a suddenly attentive gaze at Ethan.

"It's in our truck," Ethan told him. "Hey, how do I get a dial tone on this?"

"What? Damn." The Lincoln look-alike rose from his rocker faster than Ethan would have believed the old codger could move. "Quick, go shut—."

The lights went off.

"Ethan?" Kelli's voice wavered in the sudden darkness.

"Right here, hon."

"I-"

Something crashed deep within the store. Ethan heard a grunting noise, deep and harsh.

"They're here," someone whispered. "They have the Prince."

The floor vibrated with heavy footsteps. The all-too familiar reek of manure and mildewed hay enveloped Ethan. Something breathed nearby, the wheezing intake of air coming from a place higher than his head. The stench intensified, the carrion stink of rotten meat joining the already rancid miasma.

"Kelli, run!" Ethan grabbed her hand and led her down one of the aisles towards the door. Something bellowed behind them, an angry roar that shook the very walls of the store.

They burst out onto the street, Ethan practically pulling Kelli along. He opened the driver's side door of the truck and pushed her in, climbed in after her. Thanking God that he'd left the keys in the ignition, he started the truck and slammed it into reverse. Gravel flew in all directions and Kelli let out a frightened cry as Ethan backed up and then threw the SUV into drive and roared down the road towards the highway entrance.

At the end of the street, Ethan turned left, only to find the road blocked by bushes and trees. He looked in the rear view mirror, but the road was gone, replaced by thick woods.

"Ethan, what's going on?" Kelli shouted.

"I don't know." He jumped out and pulled her door open. "Come on! We have to run for it."

Holding tight to Kelli's hand, Ethan pushed into the forest that had sprung up around them. Using the truck's headlights as a compass point, he headed in the direction where the highway turnoff should have been. But after only a dozen steps, the trees closed in around them, cutting off the light. He paused and looked back, trying to get his bearings in the pitch black.

"Don't stop," Kelli said, her breath coming in labored gasps. Although only two feet away, she was only a dim, gray shape in the darkness.

"I don't want to get lost. We could wander for days."

"That's better than—" She stopped as a branch broke nearby, the snap as terrifying as a gun's report.

"Shit!" Ethan recoiled as the animal stench of the creatures rolled over them like a putrid fog.

Kelli screamed. He moved towards her but oversized, calloused hands grabbed his shoulders. The vile reek overwhelmed him and he doubled over, gagging. He heard Kelli scream again.

Then something struck his face and the world disappeared.

****

Nausea churned in Ethan's stomach. He opened his eyes and the world spun around him. His stomach spasmed, a series of dry heaves that eventually left him weak and sweating where he lay on a pile of damp, filthy straw.

"Ethan?"

At the sound of Kelli's voice, he lifted his head and peered through the gloom until he noticed a shape curled in one corner.

"I'm here, honey." He crawled over to her, trying to ignore his roiling guts.

She wasn't in much better condition. Puke crusted the front of her white shirt; dirt and straw matted her hair. He hugged her tightly, unmindful of her soiled clothes.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"I think it's a barn." Ethan eyed the room. Bales of hay dotted the wide space. At the far end, two large doors stood partly open. A gray sky was visible in the gap, the eerie pre-dawn light the only source of illumination.

"C'mon, we have to get out of here." Ethan helped Kelli to her feet. They'd only taken a few steps when the wide doors swung all the way open and three large shapes entered, their distinctive raw scent preceding them in corrupt waves. Ethan pressed an arm over his nose.

"Oh, no!" Kelli buried her face against his chest, gagging and sobbing at the same time.

The creatures were worse than he'd expected. Massive arms, thick as a man's thighs, framed barrel-shaped bodies perched atop legs like bowed tree trunks. Each one stood well over Ethan's own six feet; the one in the center

easily topped the seven-foot mark.

Like the one they'd hit on the highway, all three had gourd-shaped noses and pudgy, round faces. Eyes like glittering black buttons peered out from beneath prominent foreheads. Their only clothing was the leather belts, large knives, and hand-sewn moccasins they all wore. Their heavy, rope-like fur covered any bodily features that might have indicated individual genders.

As if aware of how their stench affected the captives, the beasts stopped several yards away. The tallest one pointed at them and uttered a series of guttural, harsh sounds. Ethan felt his heart drop.

They really can speak. They're intelligent.

And I killed one.

The bearded man from the store – Roy, Ethan remembered – stepped out from behind the three beasts.

"The Queen-Mother asked if it was you who struck her son."

"I didn't mean to. It wasn't my fault."

Roy walked closer. "Don't matter. The *Tungl Sjötrungis* has passed her sentence."

Ethan tried to repeat the strange words, couldn't get his tongue around them. "The what?"

"Gnawer of the Moon, in your tongue. She is the leader of her tribe."

"Tribe? What the hell are they?"

Roy hooked one thumb through the strap of his overalls. "They've had lots of names throughout time. In my country they're known as trolls."

Kelli looked up. "What do they want with us?"

"You've heard the old saying, 'an eye for an eye?'" Roy's face held no expression. "The trolls' version is 'a life for a life.'"

"They're going to kill us?" Kelli clutched at Ethan's shirt and he held her close.

Roy tugged at his beard. "Normally, yes. But if Prince Armund dies, a new heir will be needed. And she's too old to breed again."

He moved aside as the other two trolls stepped forward. One pushed Ethan back, while the other grabbed Kelli and roughly pulled her away. She cried out; Ethan lunged forward but his guard knocked him to the ground.

"Take me instead," Ethan shouted.

Roy shook his head. "You're not qualified."

Ethan watched in frustration as the troll dragged his wife from the barn.

“How is Kelli qualified to be the Queen’s heir?”

“Remember the old fairy tales about trolls and changling babies?”

“What?” The old man’s words made no sense.

“In the stories, trolls would sneak into a house, eat a human baby, and then replace it with one of their own.”

“What does that have to do with us? We don’t have any children.”

“The story-tellers didn’t get the details quite right. See, a baby troll wouldn’t even look human. But half-breeds look human until their tenth year—the same age the Prince is now.”

It took a moment for Ethan to understand. “That’s impossible! She can’t—”

“Actually, she can,” Roy interrupted. “As soon as the Prince dies, your wife will be given to the King, so that he can make her pregnant.”

Ethan started to object, then stopped as he realized what the old man had said. “Wait. You mean the Prince isn’t dead yet?”

“No, but it’s only a matter of time. The trolls’ knowledge of medicine is limited to herbal poultices and remedies, and our last doctor passed away over a year ago.”

“I’m a surgeon,” Ethan said. “If I can save the Prince’s life, will you let us go?”

Roy gave him a suspicious look. “You wouldn’t be saying that just to save your wife, would you?”

“No.” Ethan stared at him. “All life is sacred to me. We could have left the Prince to die. Instead we came here, looking for a police station.”

“And you think you can save him?”

Ethan shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ll need supplies; I don’t have anything with me.”

Roy turned and carried on a hurried conversation with the Queen in the troll’s language, then spoke to Ethan again. “The Prince is at the old medical office. You’ll be taken there, where you’ll have access to any supplies that remain.”

Ethan felt a chill run through him at Roy’s next words.

“Just remember. You try anything, and not only will your wife suffer, but you’ll be held accountable for the Prince’s murder. Around here, that means you’ll end up as dinner.”

****

Ethan stood inside what passed for Bergtagna's doctor's office and wondered if he'd made a mistake—a fatal mistake. Thick dust covered every surface, including the examining table where the Prince lay, the bloody sweatshirt still wrapped around his midsection. A single fluorescent bulb flickered overhead, with several large flashlights supplying additional light. Spread out on a counter were the makeshift surgical supplies Roy had brought in: two bottles of rubbing alcohol, a bucket of hot water, gauze, and a large, curved sewing needle and thread that had come from an upholstery repair kit.

Roy motioned towards the door. "There are two guards in the hallway," he warned.

"I'm not going anywhere." Ethan was amazed at the truthfulness of his words. Even if Kelli wasn't being held captive, he'd have probably tried to save the Prince's life. With a start, he realized that he'd begun thinking of the trolls as people.

When did that happen?

Ethan took a deep breath and focused on the job at hand. He found himself slipping automatically into surgical mode, as if he was back in the ER.

"The first thing we have to do is wash the wound. then I'll have to see if the intestine or colon need repairing." He pursed his lips. "Since I don't have anesthesia, you'll need to get some men in here to hold Armund down while I operate, otherwise he'll go crazy from the pain."

"Not to worry." Roy pulled a brown vial from his pocket and let a few drops of the liquid inside fall onto the Prince's tongue.

Almost immediately, the Prince's breathing slowed down.

"What's that?" Ethan reached for the bottle, but Roy pulled it away.

"Essence of *søvn blomst*," the old man said. Seeing Ethan's confusion, he added, "Roughly translated, it means sleep flower. The trolls cultivate them. The scent is mildly hallucinogenic to the trolls; a few deep breaths will make them giddy. But several drops of the concentrated oil will put even the largest troll to sleep for hours. You can operate now, without fear of the Prince waking."

Ethan stared down at the sleeping giant. For the first time since the accident, he felt no fear. Opening the package of needles, he said, "Hand me the

alcohol."

****

Ethan was nervously pacing in the waiting room when Roy entered. "Armund...is he...?"

Roy smiled. "He is fine. Awake and already talking about how he is a hero. Come, the Queen-mother requests your presence."

Ethan followed the old man back down the hall, thinking back on what he'd learned about the trolls from Roy while he'd operated on the Prince. They'd once occupied the forests of North America and Europe, but their predilection for human flesh had caused the native humans to band together and all but exterminate them. A low birthrate hadn't helped them, either.

As for the people of Bergtagna, they were the descendents of ancient Danes and Scandinavians who'd settled in the area and found a way to coexist with the trolls, by supplying them with medicines, shelter, and the occasional sacrifice, in return for not being eaten.

The Prince was sitting up and talking to his mother. The Queen's lips twisted into a grimace Ethan assumed was the troll version of a smile. She pointed at Ethan and uttered a series of grunts and snarls.

"She says that you have honored your word. She can do no less." Roy clapped his hands, and the door opened again.

A troll stood there, with Kelli.

"Ethan!" She rushed in and wrapped her arms around him.

"I thought I'd never see you again." He didn't want to let her go, but Roy called for their attention.

"There is one more thing," he said. "You have to swear on your lives that you will never speak of the trolls or Bergtagna to anyone."

"Your secret is safe with us," Ethan said, meaning every word. As monstrous as the trolls were, they deserved to live like anyone else, without scientists and the media descending on them like flies on a corpse.

"Then you can go. Your vehicle is outside."

Ethan nodded. "Thank you. Tell the Prince to take it easy for at least a week. I—"

"C'mon, let's go before they change their minds." Kelli pulled him towards

the door. The guard stepped aside as they passed.

Their Toyota sat outside, the keys in the ignition. “Hurry,” Kelli said. “I never want to see this place again.”

“I second that,” Ethan said, starting the engine.

Kelli leaned over the seat. “I have to get out of these clothes. I stink like a...hey, where did the flowers come from?”

“Flowers?” The dashboard display suddenly wavered in front of Ethan, and he had to blink several times to clear his vision.

“Yeah.” Kelli returned to the front seat, a double handful of purple blossoms in her hands. “The whole back seat’s full of them.”

Ethan remembered the *søvn blomst*, understood that they’d been tricked again. “Open...the..the...” he tried to finish the sentence, but his mouth refused to cooperate.

Kelli’s head lolled back. “I don’t feel so...” Her eyes closed and she slumped against the door.

Ethan saw several trolls approaching the truck, and they all appeared to be smiling.

Then everything disappeared.

****

“Ethan? Ethan, wake up.”

Ethan opened his eyes and found Kelli leaning over him, an anxious expression on her face.

“Kelli?”

“Hey, sweetie. You scared me for a minute. I thought you were dead.”

He sat up. They were still in the truck. “The trolls! Where are they?”

“Trolls?” Kelli frowned. “Are you sure you’re all right? You’ve got a nasty lump on your forehead.”

“No, they were after us! They tricked us, they...” he stopped as he realized the truck was back on the highway, nose down in a shallow gulley on the side of the road. In the distance, the setting sun was just dipping below the mountaintops. “Wait. How did we get back here?”

“We had an accident. We hit...something.”

“That’s right!” Ethan opened the door and got out. “We hit the Prince of the

trolls. I operated on him. Don't you remember? They wanted to keep you there."

She shook her head, more in confusion than negation. "I...I remember a dream. Something grabbed me, something big. It scared me. I...screamed for you. And then...I woke up and saw you were unconscious."

"A dream?" Ethan rubbed his head and winced. He definitely had a large bump. A quick glance in the back seat showed no evidence of purple flowers. He took a deep breath; no barnyard stink assaulted his nostrils.

Could it all have been a dream?

He turned around, and froze. A large, dark shape lay in the center of the highway. The sight of coarse, brown fur and spilled intestines reinforced his convictions.

"I knew it was real!" Before Kelli could say anything, he ran across the road. "Look! I was right. It's..." He stopped as he recognized the creature.

A bear?

Kelli came up behind him. "Oh, the poor thing." She tugged his arm. "C'mon, let's go. There might be more of them."

Ethan nodded and let his wife lead him back to the truck. He felt numb inside.

"I don't understand," he said, as he backed the truck onto the road. "It seemed so real. The town, the trolls, the old man..."

"Dreams are like that." Kelli turned around and started digging through the cooler in the back seat. "Mine seemed real, too. We probably both saw the bear before we hit it, and in our dreams, we turned it into something else. Let's just forget it. I'm starved. Do you want a snack?"

Ethan nodded. "Sure." He was hungry enough that even one of Kelli's vegan snacks sounded appetizing.

Kelli held up a handful of granola bars. "Ugh. This is so *not* what I want. Believe it or not, I have the strangest craving. I could go for a big, juicy burger, extra rare. Isn't that weird? I haven't eaten meat in years. Must be this mountain air."

"We'll stop at the first diner we see." Ethan put the truck in drive and accelerated down the highway, keeping his gaze firmly on the road ahead of them.

****

A tattered, bloody moccasin falls from beneath the car and tumbles across the road. As the taillights fade into the distance, two large, hairy figures step out of the brush. One of them picks up the moccasin. The other pulls out a large bone knife and heads for the bear.

Black Box

Up until the moment Todd Corish found the box, the day had been pretty much a repeat of the previous one: hours of boring work hauling grimy junk out of the basement. It had to be done, so the contractors could renovate the space into a mini apartment for Todd's maternal grandmother. For three years, ever since her husband died, Nana Applewhite had resisted leaving her apartment. But she'd finally acceded to her daughter's wishes to move in with them.

Todd wiped his arm across his forehead, mixing sweat and grime into a gritty, pasty mess that made his skin itch. "Mom, how much longer do we hafta stay down here? It's hot."

Brenda Corish gave him her 'you're old enough to know better' look. She had a lot of different looks, some pleasant, some not so much. This one definitely fell in the not pleasant category.

"Until we're done, Todd. We only have today and tomorrow to finish before the contractors come."

"Hmph. This sucks," Todd muttered, as he opened another box. "If you could hire people to build a room for Nana, why can't you hire someone to clean the basement?"

"Because unless you're rich, you only spend money on things you can't do yourself." Todd's father, Jerry, tied up a black garbage bag and set it by the stairs to carry up later.

"Granddad had lots of money. Why doesn't Nana?"

"That's a good question." Jerry glanced at his wife.

"Don't start," Brenda warned.

Todd looked inside the box. More old clothes. They'd been storing all of Granddad Applewhite's belongings in the basement. Now it all had to get sorted and disposed of.

And that meant Todd had to spend his weekend stuck helping his parents instead of playing baseball with his friends, which totally sucked monkey balls.

He carried the box over to the pile they'd designated for Goodwill, paused to take a drink of soda, and then moved on to the next box in his section of the long room.

That's when he found it.

"What the hell is this?"

"Todd, watch your mouth," Brenda said, without looking up from the carton she was sealing.

"Sorry, Mom. Hey, Dad, what is this?"

Jerry paused in dismantling a set of metal shelving. "Oh, that's a black box. Back before digital, photographers used them to open film canisters."

"Your grandfather had a lot of hobbies," Brenda said. "I guess photography was one of them."

"Hobbies? Is that what you call it? If you ask me, all he did was spend his money on tons of junk." Jerry grabbed a monkey skull from a nearby box. Strange symbols decorated the top of it. "Case in point."

"Don't go there, Jerry." Brenda frowned at her husband.

Todd ignored the bickering. His parents had argued about Granddad for as long as he could remember. Over the years, he'd heard enough to know his grandfather wasn't exactly well-loved by the rest of the family. He'd apparently spent most of his life working odd jobs, barely making enough money to support his wife and kids. Then one afternoon he'd come home and started telling Nana how he'd discovered a way to make more money than they could ever spend, and she should get ready 'cause they were gonna start a new life and live like royalty.

Except before he could tell her the details, he suffered a massive heart attack and died while she was still dialing 911.

Once, when Granddad was still alive, Todd had overheard his parents talking. His father said he suspected Granddad of having robbed a bank. Mom had called him an insensitive jerk, but after Granddad died, everyone had searched the apartment and checked for secret bank accounts. Of course, no money ever turned up.

Todd forgot all about cleaning the basement as he turned the metal box over in his hands. It was about two feet square, with a hinged lid. The front was made of heavy black cloth instead of metal. Extending from the cloth were two sleeves made of the same material, with elastic cuffs.

"How does it work, Dad?"

Jerry stopped in the middle of a sentence about how worthless Granddad had been and walked over to his son. "It's pretty simple. You open the top, place the unopened film inside the box, and then shut the lid. Then you stick your arms through the sleeves, and you can open the film canister. Usually the

photographer would use it to unload or load film, but he could also take film out of a camera before the whole roll was used up."

"Roll?"

"Believe it or not, kiddo, pictures weren't always stored on memory sticks or chips." He ruffled his son's hair. "I'll tell you all about it, but not now. We've got work to do."

"Okay. Can I keep it?" Something about the box drew him to it.

Jerry shrugged. "Sure. But no playing with it until after we're done."

Todd put the box aside and started sorting cardboard boxes again.

It wasn't until much later, when he was washing up for dinner, that he realized they hadn't come across any cameras or film while they were cleaning.

Todd was just getting ready to turn on the shower when he heard his parents' voices coming through the ventilation grate. That meant they were down in the basement again, near the air conditioner. Probably still cleaning.

"He was a rotten bastard, Brenda. Everyone in the family knows it. All he did was drink vodka and bitch about how he couldn't get a job. It was always someone else's fault—the Jews, the blacks, the Mexicans, the Pakistanis—they all took the jobs he was 'supposed' to have. The only thing you can give him credit for was being an equal opportunity bigot."

"That doesn't mean you can talk bad about him in front of Todd," Brenda said. "You just didn't like the way he always called you Sonny-boy. Todd doesn't need to know..."

"Know what? That his grandfather was a nutjob? Did you see some of the crap I found in those boxes today? Animal heads, old books written in Latin. There was even a Ouija board, for Chrissakes."

"Well, I don't think—"

The clanking of the central air kicking on cut off the rest of his mother's words. A cold breeze hit Todd's cheek and he stood up, turned on the water, and got ready for his shower.

Once he was clean and dry, he went to his room to watch TV rather than going downstairs, in case his parents were still arguing. They didn't argue often, but when they did, he hated being around them. Something about their angry voices made his stomach feel weird, like he wanted to throw up.

He was reaching for the remote when he noticed the black box sitting on the

floor by his desk. He picked it up and turned it around, imagining his hands inside in the darkness.

How did photographers do anything inside the box if they couldn't see? It was hard enough just walking through the house in the dark, let alone doing something complicated with his hands.

Todd decided to try an experiment. He opened the top of the box and put in a piece of paper and a pen. *Let's see if I can write a note without looking.*

A tingle ran up his arms as he slid them through the sleeves. The cuffs fit snugly around his elbows, but not so tight that they cut off the circulation. The fabric felt smooth against his skin, like the silk bathrobe his mother had hanging in her closet. The material lining the inside of the box was different, more like heavy felt or velvet.

Todd moved his hands around, trying to locate the pen and paper. At first he thought maybe they'd slid to one side, but the more he felt around, the more confused he grew.

Where could they be?

Annoyed, he pulled his arms out, flipped up the latch, and opened the top.

The white square of loose leaf and the pen were gone.

"You're shittin' me." It was his current favorite expression, ever since he heard Larry Mullin's brother Eddie say it.

He put another piece of paper inside and shut the box.

This time, when he put his arms through, he touched his hands together inside the container, making sure he could feel skin on skin. Then he felt for the paper.

Nothing.

He reached further in, sliding his hands in every direction. It wasn't until he bumped his shoulder against the front of the box that he realized something was wrong.

His arms were further in than the box was deep.

An idea came to him. Maybe it wasn't a photographer's box; maybe it was a magician's prop, like the boxes or hats with the secret compartments for hiding rabbits or doves.

He peeked over the top and around the sides, but couldn't see any way there could be extra space. When he touched his fingers together again, it felt like his hands should be at least a foot past the back of the box. Even a secret compartment couldn't be *that* deep.

A tingle of excitement coursed through him.

Somehow, the box really was magic.

When he moved his hands towards the sides, they touched cloth-lined walls, just like they should have. Same with the bottom; only the back was gone, and no matter how far Todd stretched his arms, even leaning in until his shoulders pushed the box forward, he couldn't feel anything. It was like the box sat at the beginning of a long, narrow tunnel.

"You could definitely hide a rabbit in here," he said, still thinking about magic tricks.

A moment later, something warm and fuzzy brushed up against his fingers. Without thinking, he grabbed it and pulled his arm back.

Something went *thump* inside the box.

As fast as he could, he withdrew his arms from the sleeves and opened the lid.

A white rabbit looked up with startled blue eyes, its pink nose twitching in fear.

Todd stumbled back until he hit the edge of his bed. He sat down, steadying himself with both hands. The room seemed to spin around him and his head had the same dizzy feeling as the time he'd snuck one of his aunt's cigarettes and smoked it in the back yard.

I thought of a rabbit and then it was in my hands.

Magic.

Impossible.

But there was no denying the truth; it was looking right at him, head peeking out from Granddad's black box.

What else was inside?

He took the rabbit from the box and put it on the floor. Then he closed the lid again and slid his arms back in. This time the endless space at the back didn't surprise him.

What should I wish for?

The first thing he thought of was the new Xbox game he'd wanted for his birthday, the one all the stores were still sold out of.

"Hell Warriors," he whispered.

His fingers touched hard plastic. He moved his hand around. The object was the right size and shape for a video game case. Holding it tight, he brought it back into the box. When he opened the lid, the game sat there, still wrapped in plastic.

Todd felt like shouting. It worked! He had a magic box that could give him anything he wanted.

He grabbed a pen and started making a list.

It took Todd almost half an hour to write down everything he wanted. The list ranged from toys and video games to a tablet PC, money, and a new baseball glove.

He stared at the list, trying to decide where to start, and how many things he should bring back. They weren't easy decisions; if he piled up too many things in one night his parents would notice and then he'd have to explain everything. But what if the box only had a limited number of things it would produce, like a genie? He needed to prioritize his wishes. Most expensive items first, then the others stuff after.

"Okay, here we go," Todd said to the empty room.

He was just about to put his hands in and go for the tablet when someone knocked on his door.

"Todd? Are you still up?"

His father's voice. A moment later, the door opened and his father came in. "It's after ten, young man." Jerry tapped his watch for emphasis. "You should be in bed."

"I was just playing some games," Todd said, his stomach turning over with fear as he realized the white rabbit was still somewhere in the room. What if his father saw it?

"You can play again tomorrow, after school. Lights out." Jerry stood by the door and waited until Todd climbed under the covers. Then he flicked the lights off, said goodnight, and shut the door.

Todd lay in the darkness, watching the red numbers on his alarm clock until fifteen minutes had passed and he was sure his parents were in their own room for the night. Then he turned on the small desk lamp and crawled around on the floor, searching for the rabbit. He eventually discovered it hiding under some dirty clothes in the closet.

"Sorry, boy, but there's no way I could explain you. Besides, I don't have a cage for you." He placed the rabbit in the box and shut the lid. Like before, he could only feel his own hands and the bottom of the box when he stuck his arms inside.

The rabbit was gone.

"As long as I'm here, I might as well get something." He focused on the tablet PC, picturing it as he'd seen it in the store just the other day. Eyes closed, he reached forward and immediately encountered a flat, square shape. He ran his hands over the object. Smooth metal felt cool against his damp skin. He gripped it and pulled his arms back. Heart pounding with excitement, he slid free from the sleeves and opened the box.

The tablet sat on the black cloth, exactly as he'd pictured it. He hurriedly hid it under the bed and returned his arms to the box. Would it produce anything else, or had he used up his wishes?

Don't be a dope, he told himself. *It's not a genie. I'll bet I can keep going forever.*

The question of where the items came from had crossed his mind more than once while he'd been waiting for his parents to go to bed. He'd seen enough science fiction on television to know about wormholes and alternate realities. Did the box tap into one of those? It made just as much sense as magic. Maybe more.

The video game had been wrapped in plastic, as if ready to ship from a factory to a store. But the tablet had appeared without a box at all. Did they come from the same place, or different ones? And then there was the rabbit. Todd knew white rabbits didn't live in the wild; they came from pet stores and laboratories.

But when I thought of the magician's rabbit, I thought of a white one. And the game, and the tablet, came exactly the way I pictured them in my head. Maybe the box reads my thoughts, and that's how it gives me exactly what I'm thinking of.

With that in mind, he focused hard on the next item on his list. "I want a nineteen fifty-two Mickey Mantle baseball card, autographed. In mint condition, in a plastic page." He'd started collecting baseball cards the previous year; his dad had bought him a binder to put them in. So far he'd filled twelve pages. He'd read in one of his baseball card magazines that the fifty-two Mickey Mantle could be worth as much as eighteen thousand dollars.

He reached forward, and immediately touched a thin piece of plastic. His heart sped up as he pulled it back and opened the box.

The card sat there, perfectly sealed in a thick plastic square, Mantle's signature scrawled across the bottom of the card in blue ink.

He ran one finger gently across the card, wishing he could take it out of its

plastic holder. But his father had explained how it was better not to touch them.

"You should always leave them in the plastic," he'd said. *"That way, nothing will ever happen to them."*

Todd pulled out his binder and went to put the new page in, and then stopped. How could he explain having the card? That he'd found it? No one would believe that. And he sure couldn't say that he'd bought it or traded for it. Instead, he took the metal lock box out of his closet and placed the card in with his other valuables: his good watch, his passport, and the gold bracelet his aunt had bought him for Christmas. The card would be safe there until he found a better place.

A floorboard squeaked in the hallway and Todd jumped into his bed, his heart pounding. Had he woken up one of his parents? He glanced at the clock; it was after midnight. Another creak sounded. *It's only the house settling,* he told himself. *Mom and Dad are never up this late during the week.* Still, he forced himself wait ten minutes before returning to his desk.

There was no question of stopping. He had no idea if the box would work again tomorrow. He had to get as much stuff as he could and worry about the consequences later.

For the next hour, Todd concentrated on retrieving the items on his list. He had to hide each one, a task that grew increasingly difficult as he pulled more and more objects from the box. Video games, a new baseball mitt, a dozen baseballs signed by his favorite players, a new wallet filled with twenty dollar bills, a cell phone, a portable DVD player, and a stack of DVDs, including some he knew his mother would freak out over if she knew he had them. It all got stashed behind books, under the bed, in drawers, and in shoe boxes.

At one point, he grew hungry and wished for a Big Mac, large fries, and a super-sized soda. The food came through steaming hot, the soda ice cold.

After he'd eaten, he stuck his arms back into the box and glanced at his list to see the next item.

Baby dinosaur.

Hmm, maybe I shouldn't wish for that. How would I explain having one of those in my room?

While he tried to think of something to wish for instead of his dinosaur, Todd's thoughts wandered to his grandfather. The black box had to be the source of the money Granddad had spoken to Nana about, only he'd died before he could use it. Too bad he couldn't ask Granddad where that money...

Something cold brushed against his fingertips and Todd instinctively tried to pull his hand back. Sudden pain crawled up his arm as the unseen *thing* caught him by the wrist. For one brief instant he was sure icy fingers were clawing at him, bony digits with no skin to cover them. Then hot replaced cold and fiery agony raced up his trapped limb so fast he didn't even have time to scream before an invisible force took control of his body and froze him in place, unable to move but still aware of the burning acid coursing through his muscles.

The skeleton hand holding onto him started pulling itself forward, each jerking movement adding to the torture already wracking his body. Its twin grabbed his other hand and duplicated the movements of its abominable partner, the two forces scaling his arms like amoebas engulfing their helpless prey.

Todd's imagination went wild, picturing his arms swallowed by giant leeches or mutant space creatures. He wanted to cry out but the force controlling him had his jaw locked in place as surely as if wired shut. Tears ran down his cheeks and his heart beat so hard he thought it might explode. Both arms felt like someone had peeled his skin away and poured rubbing alcohol on the exposed muscles. Lightning bolts of pain shot through his body, moving from his chest to his stomach and then up his neck.

When they reached his head, the world mercifully went dark.

"C'mon, sleepy head, rise and shine." Brenda Corish peeked her head into Todd's room. "Your alarm's been going off for ten minutes."

For a moment, Todd didn't move, then he opened his eyes and slowly picked his head up from the pillow. "I'm not going to school today."

"Really? And why not?" Brenda smiled, thinking her son was teasing her.

"Why bother? The damn teachers are always catering to the spics and retards."

"Todd Corish! That's no way to talk and you know it. Now get your ass out of bed and get ready for school. I expect to see you downstairs in five minutes, or you'll be riding the school bus with a sore behind."

"Whatever." Todd waited until she'd left the room before climbing out of bed.

Brenda stormed into the kitchen and slammed her hand against the counter.

"What was all the yelling about?" Jerry asked, as he poured a cup of coffee.

"Your son decided he doesn't want to go to school because it's full of retards and spics."

Jerry paused, his cup halfway to his mouth. "What?"

"I don't know where he got such an idea. No one we know talks like that." But as she put two slices of bread in the toaster, it came to her that she *did* know someone who talked like that. Or at least used to.

Her own father.

Todd was tying his sneakers when his father called for him. "Todd! Hurry up and get down here. We need to talk."

"I'll be right down," he shouted. He stood and went over to the black box and slid his arms in. When he opened the lid, a stack of hundred dollar bills sat next to a new pistol. He smiled and picked up the gun.

"I've got a few things to say myself, Sonny-boy."

All Dead

"Come feel me, Charlie." Kelli brushed her hands across her chest. The silk teddy just barely held its place, clinging to the edge of her nipples, exposing the roundness of the perfect breasts I remembered so well.

Then I snapped out of the trance.

"Get the fuck away from me!" I swatted at her. My hand passed right through her face, leaving me unsatisfied and even angrier, but not surprised. I was long past being surprised. She'd usually go away if I was rude enough, although it didn't work as well with her as the others. Probably because she was used to me swearing.

Kelli giggled that cute little-girl laugh that had always worked on me when she was alive. "Same old Charlie. You're so stubborn. Like the time we went to Disneyland, and you were afraid to ride Space Mountain. Remember that day?"

I stayed silent, trying not to stare at the delicate pink circle peeking out from under the silk.

"I'll take that as a yes," she said, her voice low and husky. Her bedroom voice. She took a slinky step toward me. "We ended up riding it again and again. You had a great time. And this will be the same, only *I* can ride *you*, again and again. And afterwards we can hold each other. An endless embrace. You and me, together forever.

God help me, I wanted it. I wanted *her*.

Then I remembered what she was really asking.

"No, you're not real!"

She leaned in close to me, stroking her hand sensually through the air over my crotch. "If I'm not real, then why are you so hard?"

I slid back in my chair, turned my head away. I didn't trust myself to speak. I couldn't even look at her.

"Have I ever steered you wrong?" She was so close. I wanted to feel her breath on my face, but I knew that was impossible. "You just need to trust me." Her voice sent shivers down my back.

"How can I trust you after what you did to me?" I finally asked. "You left me here, alone."

Kelli shook her head, put a sad look on her face and pulled away. "Fine. Sit

here and pout, then. I'll come back when you're in a better mood."

Tears ran down my cheeks and I closed my eyes, unwilling to believe she'd give up that easily. When she didn't speak for several seconds, I glanced over just in time to see her fading away, her body shimmering slightly as it went transparent and then disappeared.

"Thank you, God," I whispered to the now-empty room. Once more I was alone with the only earthly things that mattered to me anymore: my radio, my books, and my bed. All three served the same purpose.

They helped me escape from the real world, and the unreal one.

****

After Kelli died—I still have trouble believing it's been three years since she killed herself—I kind of lost it. I know I did. Hell, I welcomed it, pretty much let the madness take over me. She'd been my last link to sanity to begin with, my partner in a never-ending struggle. No matter how great the temptation became to just give in, each of us was there for the other, a rock to lean on, a giver of strength. I always told her I thought she was the stronger one, because she bore the pressure with a smile while I was the one who would scream and shout and cry.

Turns out it was all an act; she put on a brave face for me but inside her defenses were crumbling. In the end, she knew she was going to give in, was even looking forward to it, but kept it a secret from me.

I know all this because the first night after they took her body away, she came to me and told me so.

"I did it for you, Charlie. I knew it was the only way to get you to join us. You want us to be together, don't you?"

She knew me too well. We'd been married almost fifteen years; when you live with someone for that long, you don't have many secrets. Each facial expression, each twitch of the hand or quiet sigh, tells your partner exactly what you're thinking, what you're feeling.

Truth was, I *did* want to be with her. More than anything. At that moment, I'd have gladly done what she asked. In fact, I'd already gotten out of bed and was heading for the garage when the phone rang.

Saved by the bell, I told myself later.

It was Reynolds from work. He'd heard what had happened, and was calling to tell me to take as much time off as I needed, but he begged me to please just stop by the office and drop off the Zymanski file, otherwise the whole project would be late.

"Sure," I told him. And then I went crazy.

I threw the phone across the room. I kicked over a table. I smashed every bottle in the liquor cabinet. I threw something—a figurine, maybe, or a vase—through the front window. When the police came, they found me with a knife in my hand, slashing the sofa cushions. They pegged me for suicidal and brought me here.

My first six weeks they kept me heavily sedated; those were the best six weeks in the last three years. Oh, sure, Kelli came and visited; so did the others. But I was too doped up to understand them, too stoned to care. Most of the time I just laughed at them.

Then the doctors weaned me off the good shit, and reality came crashing down on me.

I was alone, but never truly alone.

That's when I decided I liked my little white room; that it might be nice to stay awhile.

I've never left.

****

When Kelli and the others get to be too much for me, I throw a fit and get a few days back on the hard stuff, the drugs that make me sleep through the night and laugh all day. Kelli hates it when I do that.

"She's not the only one who hates it."

A stern, disapproving voice behind me. I turned and saw my mother standing there, her arms crossed, a scowl on her face. The same look she always gave me when I'd do something she didn't think was in my best interest, like waste money on a new book or spend all day watching TV. When I got older, the supposed infractions changed—a new car, or working on a Saturday instead of coming to see her—but the look remained the same.

"This is no kind of life for you," she said now. "Sitting in this place. We both know you're not crazy. How long do you think you can fool the doctors?"

I smiled. It was always easiest to talk to my mother. It didn't make sense that they would even send her—she never could get me to do anything I didn't want to do. "As long as I have to, Mom. I'll stay here forever. Better than the alternative."

"Better than...?" Her eyes grew wide and insulted. "You'd rather be locked up and hooked on drugs than spend time with your family, your wife? What kind of son did I raise?"

"A smart one," I said with a shrug.

"A smart aleck, more like it," she countered. "We'll see what your father has to say about this."

Before I could respond, she vanished, leaving me blissfully alone again. But the respite didn't last long; it never did. Things were just getting started for me.

Flickering movement caught my eye, and I swung around in time to see my father take form.

"Hey, Dad." It was hard to get the words out. My relationship with my father had been a lot better than the one I'd had with my mother. We'd done all the father-and-son things growing up: playing catch, going fishing, watching ballgames together. He'd taught me how to ride a bike and how to tune up a car. When I moved out to be on my own, he'd helped me buy my first house, walking through it with me and pointing out what needed to be repaired.

The day he'd put the gun in his mouth and decorated the living room walls had been the worst day of my life.

Until Kelli.

For a moment, he didn't say anything, just looked at me and shook his head. When he finally spoke, his words dripped disappointment.

"Why do you treat your mother like that, Charlie? All she wants is what's best for you. For all of us. You know how important family is to her."

"You should have all thought of that while you were alive," I said. "We were already together."

"Not all of us," he reminded me.

I closed my eyes. I knew what he was referring to. The extended family, the grandparents and great-grandparents. The aunts and uncles. The cousins and second cousins. The whole goddamn family tree. Two trees, actually, if you count both sides of the family. Hell, go back far enough and you had a freakin' forest of relatives. Hundreds of them. All dead by their own hands.

All waiting for me to join them.

"It's not going to happen," I said, opening my eyes.

Dad was gone.

Something like a knife stabbed through my guts. I'd never had the chance to say my farewells to him ten years ago, and he still preferred to sneak off when my eyes were closed or I was looking in the other direction.

"You're a fucking coward!" I shouted at the ceiling. "You hear me? A coward! You couldn't say goodbye then and you still can't! You're all cowards and I'm not gonna join you!" I threw my pillow at the wall, just as the door to my room opened and two orderlies came in.

One of them held a needle.

"You seein' your family again, Charlie?" one of them asked.

I just smiled and held out my arm.

Two minutes later, I was lying on my bed, the world already growing fuzzy around me. Just before things went dark, I thought I saw my brother Jim, but I couldn't be sure. I hadn't seen him in twenty years, since he ran away and joined the Army.

Jim can't be here, I told myself. *He's still alive.*

Then I was gone, far from everyone's reach.

****

Charlie. Wake up. I have to talk to you. Charlie?

CHARLIE!

Kelli's shout brought me awake. I sat up, rubbed my eyes, and looked at her. She was sitting at the end of the bed, her legs tucked underneath her, right by my feet. It was how she'd always arranged herself when she had something serious she wanted to discuss.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"It's time." Her voice was solemn, her usual smile missing.

"Time? Time for what?" Still confused from my abrupt awakening, I tried to remember if there was something we were supposed to be doing.

"Time to come home. You've been here long enough."

I shook my head. "No, I'm not going anywhere. There's no home to return to, not with you gone."

Her lips tightened until they almost disappeared. "I'm not gone, Charlie. You

have to listen to me. There are no ghosts talking to you. I'm not dead." She extended her arm towards me. "Touch my hand. Feel it. I'm real."

"You're not. You killed yourself, like all the others. You left me."

"No, Charlie, *you* left *me*. Right after your mother died. Your father and I tried to help you, but nothing worked. The doctors put you in here after you tried to burn the house down."

Burn the house down? I didn't remember that. But then, there were so many things I no longer remembered, so many things hidden behind the misty walls the drugs created in my head.

I looked at her hand. It trembled ever so slightly, just enough to cause her wedding ring to glitter in the dim light of the single bulb overhead.

"I'll prove that you're wrong," I said, and I reached out, expecting my hand to pass through hers.

It didn't.

Her skin felt cool and dry against mine, and her fingers tightened, gripping me tight.

"You're real. Oh, my God, you're *real*." I pulled her to me, wrapped my arms around her, clutched at her body. She sobbed against my shoulder, and I felt my own tears creating warm tracks down my cheeks.

Finally I pulled back, dried her tears with my fingers. "How long?"

Kelli gave me a half-smile. "Eight months, Charlie. Eight months I've been waiting for you to come back to me."

How could I have been so stupid? How could I have thrown away so much time...time I could have been with her? I leaned forward and kissed her, smashing my lips into hers, running my tongue into her mouth, tasting her sweet candy breath mixed with the saltiness of her tears.

I almost cried again when she broke the kiss.

"I can't stay, Charlie. Visiting hours are almost over. But if you show them you're better, we can be together again in the morning. For good, this time."

"Show them I'm better? How?" I was ready to do anything to be with her again, now that I knew my ghosts had been nothing but delusions.

"You have to prove to yourself that your delusions aren't real. You have to kill yourself."

"No! That's what the ghosts have been telling me to do."

Kelli cradled my face in her hands. So cool and soft against my skin, they calmed me the way water calms a fire. "Exactly. And since it's not real,

nothing can actually happen to you. That's the only way you'll really believe it's all been a nightmare. You have to break the cycle."

It made sense. If everything around me had been an illusion, a figment of my own imagination, then committing suicide would end it and I'd be left with reality.

I nodded. "I'll do it."

Kelli's smile burned any traces of fear out of me. I'd always loved her smile. "That's my boy." She gave me another kiss and then stood up. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I watched her open the door and leave. For once, the sound of the door shutting again didn't make me feel trapped or alone.

"Tomorrow," I whispered.

****

The first thing I felt when I woke up was pain. My throat ached with it; a burning, vicious red throbbing that caused me to gasp for air. It was like breathing smoke through a straw. I choked and gagged as my lungs strained to fill themselves. I tried to reach for my throat. I wanted to claw out whatever was obstructing the airflow.

My hands wouldn't move.

I could feel my eyes bulging from their sockets from the pressure in my throat, but I still managed to look down and see I was strapped to a table, bandages covering both wrists. I heaved my body, trying to break free. Each movement sent further jolts of pain down my neck, and caused me to wheeze even harder. My vision grew dim; spots twirled and danced before my eyes.

A figure came into view, fuzzy and indistinct. Something touched my arm. A second later, the pain went away and I was able to breathe easier. I drew in deep lungfuls of air, my panic receding as my body got the oxygen it craved.

"Is that better, Mr. Mason?" An unfamiliar voice, somewhere out of my range of vision.

"Yes," I said. It sounded more like a croak than anything.

Something touched my lips. "Drink this, it will help."

I sucked on the straw. Cool liquid poured across my tongue and down my throat, washing away the last of the pain with soothing wetness.

When I tried to speak again, my voice was almost normal. "Where am I?"

A man's face came into view. I knew him. Dr. Kray.

I was still in the hospital.

"You're in the infirmary, Mr. Mason. Do you know why?"

Kelli's face appeared in my mind's eye. Her visit. Last night? "I'm supposed to go home. My wife said that if I prove I'm better, I can go home."

One of Kray's eyebrows went up. "When did she tell you this?"

"The last time she came to visit. Yesterday."

The doctor's lips tightened, the kind of expression you see on people when they have to tell you bad news but don't want to.

"Mr. Mason, we've been over this before. Your wife is dead. You're in here because you've tried to commit suicide in the past. You tried again last night. Do you remember that?"

I didn't. "No."

"You tried to strangle yourself with your bedsheet. Your neck will be sore for a few days, and it will hurt to swallow, but you'll be fine. However, we're going to have to keep you sedated and restrained, at least for a while."

He jotted down some notes on a clipboard and gave me a professional smile that carried no real warmth. "I'll be back later to see how you're doing. Get some rest."

Kray left, the nurse who'd spoken to me following behind. I heard a door shut, and the room took on a feeling I knew too well. I was alone.

I closed my eyes and started counting.

I'd reached forty-five when she spoke.

"I can't believe you, Charlie. You screwed up again."

Opening my eyes brought the expected sight of Kelli standing by the bed. She looked as beautiful as she had the night before, and something inside me broke. My last traces of tenacity crumbled.

I remembered how she felt in my arms, and I knew the time had come for us to be together again. Even if I had to die to do it. I couldn't stand the thought of another day—another minute—without her.

Why had I ever bothered fighting it? What good was my life if Kelli wasn't in it?

"That's what I've been trying to tell you, silly," she said. "That's what we've *all* been trying to tell you."

Flashes of light glittered behind her, and the rest of them appeared: Mom and

Dad, my grandparents, long-lost cousins.

"We've all been waiting for you," Dad said. He came forward and put a rough, calloused hand on my shoulder. "It's so wonderful. We can go fishing again, anytime you want."

My mother spoke up. "I'll be the kind of mother I should have been when I was alive, Charlie."

They gathered around me, my wife and family, telling me how much they loved me, missed me. They laughed and they cried. I cried, too, knowing that I'd be with them soon, that I'd never be alone again.

I don't know how long we stayed like that, but suddenly they all stepped aside. A moment later, the door opened, and I heard footsteps.

"Time for your medicine," the nurse said as she approached the bed.

She swabbed my arm, but before she could deliver the shot, I spoke up. "Nurse, my hand. It's all pins and needles. Can you loosen the strap? It really hurts."

"Sure." She undid the binding and started rubbing my hand. "Is the feeling coming back?"

Instead of answering, I pulled my hand away and grabbed her by the shirt, yanked her forward. Her head landed on my stomach and I shifted my grip, clenching her neck in the crook of my arm like a wrestler delivering a chokehold. I squeezed as hard as I could, but she managed to get out a brief scream before I cut off her air supply. I held on until she went limp, and then I let go, knowing I'd only have a minute or two, at best.

As fast as I could, I fumbled open the strap on my other arm and sat up. I didn't bother freeing my feet. The only thing I needed was right next to me on a metal tray—the needle the nurse had planned on using.

"Do it, Charlie!" Kelli whispered. "Hurry!"

The others cried out their urging as well. I grabbed the syringe and pulled the cap off. Without pause, I jammed it into my eye as far as it would go and pushed in the plunger.

Agony exploded in my head and face, and I howled, my cry of pain causing a second wave of torture to erupt from my already bruised throat.

I fell back on the table, my hands instinctively clawing at my eye, trying to end my suffering. Dim voices shouted, but I only heard pieces of what they said.

Crash cart. Emergency. Code Blue.

Then it all disappeared.

****

There was no sensation of time passing, but at some point the black slowly brightened until I was surrounded by white. No walls, no floor, no sky. Just white.

"Hello, Charlie."

I turned around, and there she was. Kelli, in all her radiant glory. If anything, she looked more beautiful now than she had when she was alive.

My whole family stood behind her in a big, smiling group.

"Kelli." I started towards her, and she opened her arms, welcoming me.

She waited until I had my arms around her before she changed.

Her beautiful outer shell flaked off in cakey pieces, revealing green, scaly skin, a hole where her nose should have been, a giant mouth filled with jagged teeth. Red eyes that dripped pus-yellow fluids.

I tried to turn around, but her freshly-grown claws dug into my arms. Her head darted forward faster than a cobra and she bit a chunk of flesh from my shoulder. I screamed, but my cries were muffled by the rest of the family, all of them now hideous creatures, as they smothered me, joining Kelli for the feast. They tore at me, shredding my skin, pulling pieces of my flesh with their teeth and nails.

When they were done, there was nothing left of me except my bones and my horror.

"Welcome to Hell, Charlie," Kelli said, her voice clotted and phlegmy with my blood. Her human appearance had returned. "We're going to do this every day for eternity, unless..."

Unless what? I wondered.

"Unless you bring someone over," Dad finished.

Bring someone...?

"The way I brought you." Kelli gave me an evil smile. "You've caused me a lot of pain. Three years I've been waiting for you to kill yourself. That's like a fucking eternity here. I've been gutted, tortured, and raped more times than you can count. I hope it takes you just as long to bring Jim to us. I hope it takes you for-fucking-*ever*."

Jim? My brother?

"That's the price, Charlie," my mother said.

"No!" I had my voice back. I looked down, saw my body had regenerated.

My family attacked again, only this time they all had fangs filled with poison.

"How long can you take it, Charlie?" Kelli asked, as I twitched and writhed from the acid in my veins.

Giving in is always easier the second time.

"Tell me how to find him."

DeVille's Studio

"Some primitive cultures believe that taking a person's picture steals their soul." The man wearing the rumpled suit and crooked smile gestured at Stan DeVille's camera. "How many souls does that thing hold?"

Stan chuckled and ran a finger along his neatly trimmed goatee. "Depends on how many people are in the picture, I suppose." He pushed a button and popped out the memory card. "At twenty-four megapixels, I get around two hundred pictures on a four-gig card. I'll usually fill two cards at a typical wedding."

"That's handy." The man finished his drink and slid unsteadily off his bar stool. "Well, better get back to the wife. I promised her a dance."

"Hold on." Stan held up the camera. "Give me a good smile for the bride and groom."

The man laughed as the flash went off. "Be careful with my soul, now."

"I always am," Stan said.

"Okay, big smile now." Stan waited until everyone at the table looked his way, then snapped the picture. "Thanks, folks."

He glanced around the hall. Most of the guests were at their tables eating dinner; his own stomach was growling in response to the delicious odors of Beef Bourguignon, Chicken Milanese, and Mahi-Mahi, the three choices for the main course. A few couples danced slowly to the band's half-decent rendition of 'Strangers in the Night.' As much as he wanted to sit down and eat, this was the best time to get table shots. And Lydia Esteban, now Lydia Cooper, had made it clear she wanted lots of table shots. He could still hear her not-so-subtle instructions.

"Don't miss anyone, understand? Table shots are my favorites. I'm paying you a lot of money to do this my way."

He pushed her shrill, nasal voice out of his head. *Only six more to go, plus the head table. Then I can grab a quick bite in the kitchen.*

On to the next table.

"Hi, I'm Stan DeVille. The bride and groom would like a picture of all of you together. This won't take long, and then I'll let you get back to your dinners. Can you all scoot together? A little more. That's great. Now smile."

"Ms. Cooper? Time for your group shot. I've saved the best for last."

"I hope you got everyone. You didn't leave anyone out, did you?" Lydia Cooper's lips puckered in that annoying, spinster-aunt kind of way Stan had grown to despise over the past two days, first at the rehearsal dinner and now at the wedding.

Stan glanced at Frank Cooper, a mouse of a man who sat with his face averted, his meal uneaten before him.

There's a guy whose soul was stolen the minute he put that ring on her finger. Anyone dumb enough to marry this evil badger of a woman deserves what he gets.

"I made sure to get everyone, don't worry."

"Don't tell her not to worry, of course she's worried. It's her wedding day. Everything has to be perfect."

Stan turned his gaze towards Carmen Esteban-Gomez, the bride's younger sister. They would have looked like twins, except Carmen carried an extra ninety pounds on her five-foot frame and seemed to have learned the art of applying makeup from a clown school graduate. She was certainly following her older sister's footsteps when it came to attitude, however.

"And make sure you get me from the right side, that's my good side," Carmen added, her lips pursing in identical fish-like fashion to Lydia's.

Good side? Her two sides are mean and miserable.

"No problem. Now, everyone stand behind the bride and groom for the group photo, then I'll do some of the individual couples."

"Hurry up, already," Lydia told her tablemates. "I want to dance."

"Everyone give me a big smile," Stan said. "C'mon, put some soul into it."

Stan stayed until the last guests had said their goodbyes. One of his trademarks was catching people as they departed, something a lot of other photographers didn't bother with but which his customers seemed to appreciate. Although on this night, more people than usual seemed glad the party was over.

Once the final stragglers had left, he approached the groom.

"Mr. Cooper? I'll be taking off now. I just need to get the final payment and have you sign the receipt."

"Sure." The skinny, balding man pulled a check from his wallet and handed it over. "Where do I sign?"

"Right there," Stan said, indicating the line. He glanced at the check to make sure it was made out to DeVille Works, Inc. "I'll call you when I've got the proofs ready, in about two weeks."

"Thanks, Mr. DeVille. I...um, I hope Lydia didn't..."

"Frank? What are you doing?" Lydia approached in shark-like fashion, Carmen right beside her, an unflattering remora forever stuck in her sister's shadow.

"Just paying Mr. DeVille, hon," Cooper replied.

She shook her head and gave an exasperated sigh. "How many times do I have to tell you? Stop chatting with the help and load those boxes in the car. I wanna get back to the room and out of these goddamned shoes."

The women left the two men in their wake, Carmen throwing them a final lemon-faced look over her shoulder as she went by.

Stan patted Frank Cooper on the shoulder. "Don't worry, you don't have to explain. I've dealt with worse."

Although never in the way you're going to have to.

He pocketed the check and walked away, leaving the sad-faced man standing alone.

Get used to it, buddy.

Back at his apartment, Stan went through his usual post-wedding ritual, downloading the pictures from the memory cards onto his computer's hard drive. From there he'd save them twice more, to an external hard drive and an online line storage service. You couldn't be too careful, not when people were paying you several grand to capture once-in-a-lifetime memories.

As always, he scrolled through the finished pics to make sure there'd been no technical glitches. In the old days, when he'd shot with film, he'd done the same thing with the negatives after they came back from the developer.

As he moved the scroll bar, he came across a picture of Carmen and Lydia standing by the champagne bar, wearing matching tight-lipped expressions as they glowered at the camera.

He stared at it a moment, fighting the temptation that was always there.

"I really shouldn't," he whispered to himself.

You know you want to. You deserve it. They *deserve it.*

Temptation won.

"Oh, what the Hell."

He hit the print button. The color printer whirred to life and a moment later spat out a vivid 5x7 print. Stan picked it up and watched as a momentary ghostly pink glow enveloped the two figures, both of them with their pinched looks as if they'd just caught a whiff of something nasty.

He gathered the misty glow in one hand and brought it up to his face, breathing in deeply to draw the essence into his lungs.

Leaning back in his chair, he let out a contented sigh as he let the picture, now faded and tinted red, fall to the desk. In a deep, melodic voice, he began softly singing an old Carly Simon song.

"You belong to me..."

Grave Secrets

The town exuded an air of sullen hostility that seemed as much a part of its natural condition as the clammy mists obscuring the moss-encrusted sign announcing *Welcome To Rocky Point.*

Eric Wagner's pulse sped up and he gripped the wheel of his 1965 Fleetwood tighter, although it wasn't the slippery road that had him anxious.

This is it.

He guided the car down the exit ramp. In the passenger seat, Arthur leaned forward, his brow furrowed as if trying to part the mists through sheer force of will.

Not for the first time since leaving Hoboken, Eric wondered if he'd made the right decision bringing the boy.

He's a young man now, not a boy. Almost twenty-one. I wasn't much older than him when I got married.

Since Annie's death the previous year, Arthur had grown distant, withdrawn, spending most of his time in his room. He'd always been close to his mother. So when he'd insisted on coming along, the thought of them spending time together had been too appealing and Eric eventually gave in, despite his misgivings.

I won't let anything happen to him.

Besides, there'd been no time to discuss things. The urgency to leave had been too great. He just hoped the decision wouldn't come back to haunt him.

He already had one ghost doing that.

A mile of driving brought them to the center of town. Gray vapors leached all the color from the small village, turning it into a faded version of reality. The bright colors of autumn leaves, which had created a spectacular watercolor of vibrant joy during the ride up from New Jersey, were gone, replaced by monochromes of brown. Even the buildings and cars seemed muted, as if God had put the entire town through too many wash cycles.

The few people they saw looked pale and listless as they went about their morning routines, opening shops or getting into cars.

"So where do we go now?" Arthur asked.

"The bungalows." It had been twenty-five years since his parents were notified that Wade's Packard had been found abandoned in the forests north of

Rocky Point, but he remembered the name of the tourist court as if he'd heard it yesterday: Andre's Lodge. He'd been overseas, aiding with the administration of war supplies for the Allied troops, when Wade disappeared, so he'd never seen his brother's last known address in person.

Now he intended to stay there, recreate Wade's visit. And in the process, discover why his brother had been so interested in the desolate forests outside of town that he'd given his life to discover their secrets.

Hopefully, that would also end the dreams.

Wandering through a dark landscape, surrounded by towering trees and vast swamps. Cold mist hiding things that lurked in the gloom. Things that spoke in peculiar grunts and clicks. Dread laying heavy across his shoulders, causing his heart to pound and his legs to shake. But he couldn't stop. He had to keep going. Had to help Wade—

Eric bit his lip and forced down the memory of his nightmare. The same one he'd had the past three nights. Each time, he'd woken covered in sweat, hands trembling and heart pounding so badly he'd feared it would burst. Still, he'd never considered visiting Rocky Point until the letter came.

It arrived on October sixth, two days after Wade began plaguing his sleep. No return address, although the blurred postmark indicated it originated in Rocky Point, New York. The sight of that name, after dreaming of his brother, turned his stomach to ice.

The handwritten script on the envelope gave no clues. Jagged, scrawling letters, as if written by a shaking or uneducated hand. A single sheet, neatly folded, sat inside. He removed it, noting several dark smudges on the paper, which smelled vaguely of mildew. Lines of the same rough characters ran across the page in uneven fashion.

Dear Eric,

It's been too long since I last wrote, and for that I apologize. But events here in Rocky Point have had me occupied to the point of obsession. However, I believe my work has come to fruition. I've discovered something, a wondrous secret. The library here, it's a treasure trove of lost information. And if what I think is true... No, I won't tell you. You'd think me crazy. And perhaps I am. God knows it feels that way sometimes. You must come, see for yourself. Join

me, Eric. One last adventure, like old times.

All my best,
Wade

He and Arthur had left the following day.

****

Eric dropped his bag on the bed and sat down. A thin, lumpy mattress greeted him, and he wondered if it was the same one Wade had slept on in 1940. Arthur tested its twin on the other side of the small room and frowned, then headed for the tiny bathroom.

Alone, Eric's thoughts turned to his younger days, when he and Wade had spent weekends and holidays chasing Wade's elusive theories. Those had been good times, helping his older brother search for clues to mysteries most people had never heard of.

And what led you here? Eric stared out the window. The dismal October morning was grudgingly giving way to a dreary October day, the sun struggling to force its rays through the fog that continued to shroud the town. *What theory were you chasing?*

Theories.

Wade never lacked one, and they always centered around things decidedly unnatural. Hauntings. Strange lights in the sky. Rumors of creatures lurking in deep woods. Local legends scientists scoffed at.

Over the years, Wade had continued to seek out answers, long after Eric gave it up and joined the family business. He'd kept in touch sporadically, mailing Eric from one remote locale or another, draining his bank account as fast as their father replenished it.

Throughout the thirties, those letters arrived every few months. St. Georges, Bermuda. Sedona, Arizona. Bridgewater, Massachusetts. Lake Champlain.

The final one had arrived several days after Wade's disappearance. October 3, 1940. Decades later, Eric still remembered it word for word.

Eric,

I've arrived in Rocky Point. How I wish you were with me. Not a day goes by that I don't miss having you as a companion on these quests. Your cheerful demeanor would be most welcome here. The people of this gloomy place are like their town, dour and surly. Attempts at conversation are met with guarded answers at best, and downright hostile glares as often as not. Tomorrow I will visit the library. If all goes well, I will find the information I need.

Mysterious, I know, and this may prove to be yet another dead end. I have high hopes, though.

All my best,
Wade

Dour and surly. That certainly described the clerk who'd registered them when they arrived. He'd been a most queer fellow, with a thin, oddly-shaped head and crooked, protruding teeth that hinted strongly at inbreeding. After struggling to count the cash Eric handed over, he'd passed them their key with a glare.

"Don't want no trouble, hear?" he'd muttered, his breath bordering on poisonous. Repelled by the stench, Eric took the key and left.

Dour and surly, indeed. Maybe tomorrow—

A series of three quick knocks interrupted his thought. He crossed the room and opened the door, expecting to see the rodent-faced clerk. Instead, he found an empty parking lot.

And an envelope on the top step, with his name on it and the address of the motor court underneath.

Eric's gut twisted as he recognized the barely legible writing.

Once again, dark smudges tarnished the otherwise clean paper, like blight on healthy fruit. A foul odor wafted up as he pulled the letter free. More of the marks stained the edges.

Eric,

This place! I believe it's the key to everything I've been searching for. A nexus, if you will. Like the one in Arkham. There are things

there, things that shouldn't exist. I know how this sounds. You must think me crazy. Perhaps I am. But if I'm not, then how to explain the movements in the shadows, the whispers in the night? Voices in empty rooms?

I hope you will join me soon. I want you to witness this. Please hurry. They're waiting for us.

All my best,
Wade

A quick check of the postmark showed it had been mailed on October sixth, the same day he'd received the previous one. And like the other, the year on the postmark was ruined, as if someone had run a thumb across it before the ink dried.

"How did anyone know we'd be here?" Arthur asked, peering over his shoulder.

Eric shook his head, fighting the urge to crumple the letter and throw it across the room. He wanted to believe it was somebody's idea of a sick joke, but who would do such a thing? And why now? Twenty-five years to the week of Wade's disappearance. And then there were the dreams...

Eric rubbed his temples, where a dull ache had formed. He needed answers.

And he knew where to start.

****

The Post Office squatted at the end of Main Street, gray stone walls nearly invisible in the fog, a limp, discolored American flag hanging from a pole.

A grim-faced young woman greeted them with narrowed eyes and a curt, "Yes?" No name tag adorned her uniform; a peculiar decorative pin sat in its place. A brown octopus. Or perhaps a squid. Eric couldn't be sure.

"Someone sent these to me from here." Eric laid the two envelopes down. "I need to find out who."

The woman shook her head. "Can't help you."

"Then tell me who can. I'm not leaving until I get some answers."

"Only person who can help you is Rory Calvert, the regular clerk. And he's dead."

"What?"

"Yep. Murdered. Right there." The woman pointed behind her. For the first time, a hint of animation entered her voice. "Three days ago. I'm just filling in."

"What happened?" Arthur asked.

"It was awful." A vulgar grin showed her true feelings. "They found him all torn up. World's getting to be a crazy place."

Her smile grew wider, almost manic. Seeing it, Eric lost all desire to question her further. They could find out the rest of the details at the library.

"Yes. Well, thank you." He turned toward the door, Arthur already two steps ahead of him.

"You're gonna die out there, just like your brother."

Eric whirled around. The woman was gone.

"Hey!" He ran to the counter and shouted again. When no one answered, he climbed over. A quick search of the sorting area revealed nothing but bags of mail and a back exit, locked from the inside. A dank odor permeated the small space, reminiscent of wet earth and rotting leaves.

"Dad, let's go." Arthur tugged his sleeve, his eyes troubled.

Walking to the car, Eric found himself glancing back, unable to shake the feeling of being watched.

****

At two in the afternoon, Eric and Arthur had the second floor of the Rocky Point Public Library to themselves. Weak, flickering lights fought a losing battle against a gloom created by thickening clouds outside and decades of grime on the tall windows.

Eric leaned back and rubbed his eyes, which burned from hours of scanning microfilmed documents. At a nearby table, Arthur made his way through stacks of books on the history of the Hudson Valley in general, and Rocky Point in particular.

Eric's stomach churned as he struggled to make sense of everything he'd learned. Based on Wade's interest in the town, Eric had expected to find

something odd when he delved into Rocky Point's past, but nothing like the awful things he'd read.

Since its formation in the 1600s, the town had endured a non-stop series of macabre occurrences that continued to the present time. A leper colony burned to the ground. A mental institution illegally experimenting on patients in the 1940s. Rumors of ghosts haunting the cemetery. Entire families vanishing in the middle of the night. Strange lights in the swamplands to the north of town.

The same area where the police had discovered Wade's car.

Eric clutched his sweater tighter as a chill danced its way through him. Questions swirled in his head like the wind-blown leaves on the sidewalks outside. Sudden claustrophobia constricted his chest and made it hard to breathe. The room took on an ominous air and he realized it had grown much darker. He glanced at the windows, saw heavy storm clouds looming over the town. A miasma of corrupted flesh and rotten vegetation assaulted his nose. Downstairs, a door closed with a *bang!* that made him jump and turn, half-expecting to see a monstrous creature coming toward him, fangs dripping and claws ready to rend meat from bone.

Get out!

He leaped up and ran for the stairs, took them two at a time, his pounding footsteps echoing off the cinderblock walls. At the bottom, he shouldered the door open and sped past the front desk, where a librarian with a noticeable hump glowered through thick glasses. Only when he stood on the sidewalk, breath steaming in the chill air, did his anxiety fade. By the time Arthur burst through the front doors, Eric had calmed himself to the point where his pulse no longer throbbed in his temples.

"What happened?"

"I'm fine." Eric waved him away.

"You don't look fine."

"I needed to get some air. Clear my head."

"Oh." Arthur's face registered disbelief, but he didn't press the issue. Eric took a deep breath, then glanced up as the first rain drops struck the ground.

Movement in one of the library's upstairs windows caught his eye, an indistinct shadowy form that raised the hairs on his neck. Something about its shape seemed...*wrong*.

"We better get back to the room."

For the rest of the evening, he couldn't stop thinking about the image in the

window.

That, and the postal worker's pin.

****

A queer silence surrounded him, as if the mist had sucked away all sound. Or perhaps all life. Yet somehow he knew he wasn't alone. The sensation of being watched followed him, unseen eyes observing his every move.

Over hills, squeezing between broken mountains of stone, the trail led deeper into the forest. Pockets of slick leaves soaked his shoes and threatened to send him tumbling down rocky slopes.

The stench of sulfurous swamp gas mixed with putrid flesh filled the air. A branch snapped, the sound a gunshot in the preternatural stillness. He turned, caught the merest glimpse of movement among the shadows. An impression of something tall, with too many limbs. A few steps later, a belching croak spun him in the other direction. The feeling of unseen eyes grew stronger. More grunting, deep and low, now from both sides of the path. Someone calling his name. A familiar voice. Wade—

Eric woke with a gasp, the depraved noises fading as his dream dissolved. A final grunt, followed by a muffled thump, turned his gaze toward the windows, where dull, pre-dawn light filtered in through a haze of damp filth. For a moment, it had almost seemed like the noises came from outside...

No. He shook his head, as much in negation as to clear the last remnants of sleep.

The path. I know where it is. He could still see it, a map imprinted in his brain. The trail Wade had followed. A new urgency filled him. They had to leave now or they'd lose the window of opportunity.

A part of him insisted he should just get in the car and leave, put Rocky Point and its awful secrets behind him, never return. Except he couldn't. If he did, Wade's fate would forever remain a mystery, a question nagging at him.

So I'll be careful. I know it might be dangerous. I won't take any risks. But I can't delay.

He roused Arthur, told him they were leaving, then opened the door, intending to go warm up the car. Omnipresent mist delivered a damp greeting. The previous day's rains had abated, leaving moist air that reeked of mold and

earth. A wet carpet of leaves, pine needles, and acorns covered the ground in somber yellows and browns, a harbinger of November's drab coat.

Returning from the car, he approached the open door and paused at the sight of peculiar marks on the window.

Four vertical lines extending out from wide smudges. In between the two fan-shaped blemishes was a single, circular smear. He put a hand up to one of the larger marks and shivered. Take away his thumb and the pattern looked alarmingly like a hand. One twice the size of his own, with fingers much wider at their tips than their base. And the mark in the middle...

He thought about the noises he'd heard earlier and a disturbing picture formed in his head. A wild beast, its feet and nose pressed against the glass, watching them sleep. Darting away when it saw him start to wake.

The grunt. The thump.

He turned his gaze downward. Areas of flattened grass under the window. More of them leading toward the parking lot, longer and wider than a human foot. They disappeared when they reached the blacktop. Eric looked across the lot, where the woods and swamplands began, their depths veiled by the mist. A fetid, boggy smell hung in the air, reminiscent of the odor they'd encountered in the post office.

No animal did this. Wild animals don't peer into windows. Or leave letters.

Another shiver made him twitch. For the first time since arriving in Rocky Point, he prayed the fog wouldn't lift.

Some things were better left unseen.

****

Arthur remained silent during the treacherous drive through the winding roads of Harriman State Park, hands gripping his armrests with white-knuckled intensity as they sped through harrowing bends and twists that remained hidden by the mist until the very last second. Anxiety permeated Eric's being as well, but it had nothing to do with the sharp curves or slick surface. Despite the poor visibility, he knew which turns to take, just as he knew when to bring the car to a stop next to a shallow stream that carved through the woods.

His concern stemmed from a growing pressure inside him, a gut sensation

that they needed to hurry. *Wade... he's out there. Waiting. But not for long.*

"This is it."

Arthur raised an eyebrow but didn't question the statement. Instead, he joined Eric at the front of the car to view a somber, primeval world, as if they'd driven back in time rather than twenty miles from town. Their breath created miniature clouds in the cool air, which quickly melded with the all-encompassing fog. That same fog reduced visibility to a few yards and dampened noise and flesh alike, leaving the trickling water and the metallic *tic-tic* of the engine as the only sounds. Eric stared at the vine-covered trees, their tops lost in the murky vapors, and an image came to him, so real his heart stuttered. A prehistoric beast lumbering out of the forest, its maw filled with jagged teeth—

"Which way?"

"There." Glad to have his thoughts interrupted, Eric pointed at a narrow space between some crimson thorn bushes. Everything was just as he'd dreamt. The gradual uphill slope, the whirling vapors filling the spaces between the trees with cloying moisture, the preternatural silence.

He stepped across the creek into the thick underbrush, ignoring the wet leaves that soaked his pants and the twigs and barbs that snagged his coat. Twenty feet in and the fog swallowed the car. Another ten and he lost the chuckle of water flowing over rocks, leaving nothing but the soft swish of their pants and the muffled scuffing of their shoes against decades of moldering leaves to break the graveyard hush.

For the next hour, the trail twisted between towering trees and boulders the size of houses and took them over several hills before it reached a stretch of flat land bordered on both sides by endless swamp.

"This place gives me the creeps," Arthur said.

Eric looked at Arthur, who was scanning the woods, his eyes narrowed.

"It doesn't matter." Eric continued on, doing his best to ignore his own imaginings of bloated nightmare creatures hiding behind trees and rocks. Arthur sighed and followed.

As they moved deeper into the wetlands, the air took on a rank aroma, a heady mix of sulfur and decomposition that turned breathing into an unpleasant chore. From time to time the mists thinned, creating narrow bands of visibility, just enough to reveal glimpses of black waters covered in a repugnant greenish-brown slime. Dead trees jutted from the quagmire, gray spires devoid

of branches and tapering to sharp points at the top. Their hollow, decomposing trunks made Eric wonder if the water contained toxic chemicals, a noxious byproduct of the dreadful scum coating everything.

Furtive noises broke the silence. The soft plop of something ducking into the water, the low *chunk-glunk* of clandestine amphibians calling out. Ordinary sounds, yet somehow threatening at the same time. No mundane creatures could survive in such a malevolent environment. Eric's imagination was only too happy to deliver images of deformed, semi-sentient monstrosities, with tentacles for limbs and too many eyes. Mutant guardians announcing the presence of intruders to whatever lay beyond the next set of hills.

The trail curved and bent its way ever deeper into the forest. The stench of corruption grew worse, coating Eric's tongue and filling his nose. He found himself worrying about what contaminants or vile spores he might be breathing in. Still, there could be no turning back.

Wade needs me.

The noises increased in volume, chirps and bleats and croaks graduating into crocodilian bellows and rumbles.

Splashes in the water drew his attention, but each time he was too slow, left with only glimpses of muddy ripples. Hints of movement along the trail caught his eye, momentary flashes of darker gray that never resolved into distinct shapes.

"Maybe we should turn around."

Eric jumped a little at Arthur's words, the first he'd spoken since they entered the wetlands.

Maybe we should. This place, it's not safe. It's already taken your brother. Why risk losing your son?

"Eric, I need you." Wade's voice. Urgent.

No. I have to go on. I have to know.

"I can't stop now." Without explaining further, he turned and continued walking. Arthur muttered a curse but Eric ignored it. Nothing was going to prevent him from seeing the journey to its end.

Nothing.

After another half hour, the trail sloped upward and mounds of earth and rock replaced the fetid waters. Trees created impenetrable walls on both sides of the path, some with trunks so wide two men couldn't have circled them with their arms. These giants stood sentinel among their smaller relatives, all

clothed in offensive molds and lichens that made Eric wary of touching anything, for fear of contagion. As the path grew steeper, dirt and leaves gave way to loose stones interspersed with sections of flat shale made treacherously slick by moisture and slime. Repulsive mushrooms sprouted between the rocks and along the sides of the trail, their bulbous caps brown and leprous.

The movement in the mist grew more pronounced, the vague shapes setting Eric's heart pounding as they darted between trees or behind rocks. Some of the shadowy creatures appeared no larger than foxes, slinking along the ground. Others gave the impression of immense size, with shapes that defiled natural order, blasphemous figures with bizarre protuberances and limbs in places God never intended.

The trail continued to rise and their breathing became labored, adding a steady rhythm to the intimidating sounds of snapping branches and antediluvian grunts emanating from the shrouded depths. Eric forced his legs to work harder, paying no heed to the twin dangers of the steep slope and slippery surface. When they reached the summit, Arthur asked him if he wanted to rest and Eric shook his head.

"No. No time." A wordless voice kept telling him to hurry, to—

Find me. Find me.

"I'm coming, Wade. I'm almost there."

They descended into a fog so dense it created an almost solid wall that made it impossible to see more than two steps ahead. Brown-leafed trees crowded the trail, forcing them to walk single file. The vicious fetor of decay attacked their noses with each brush of flesh against mildewed wood, with each abhorrent fungi crushed underfoot.

Eric's compulsion built to a crescendo and he broke into a run, dashing blindly down the slope. A distant voice called to him but he ignored it, all his attention focused on what lay at the bottom of the rocky path.

Wade. He's there. Waiting. They've brought me to him. That was their purpose, to—

The mist broke, revealing the pit at the base of the hill, a voracious, gaping maw eager for food. He tried to stop but his feet slid on a patch of wet leaves and he fell, arms wind-milling in a desperate, hopeless attempt to catch his balance.

Too late—

Strong hands pulled him away. He hit the ground hard, the impact driving the

breath from his lungs. He lay there, gasping for air, his body so close to the edge one arm dangled over the side.

"Are you all right?"

Arthur's face appeared above him, eyes wide with concern. Eric nodded and sat up, wincing at the aches in his hip and ribs.

"Thank you," he whispered. He wanted to say more, but his heaving chest wouldn't allow it.

Arthur moved away and knelt at the edge. Looked down. His face went pale and he bit his lip.

"What is it?" Eric asked. Arthur shook his head.

Eric's body moved of its own volition, even as his brain screamed for it to stop. He had to see. Despite his pain, he knelt on the sodden leaves and peered over the edge. Cold air wafted from the pit, carrying a sweet yet sickening odor, sugar and spice and sun-baked roadkill all rolled into one.

Twenty feet down lay the remains of a body.

Wooden spikes protruded through the corpse's stomach, legs, and shoulders. More jutted from the dirt. Layers of aged, yellowed bones provided evidence this wasn't the first victim the pit had claimed.

I was supposed to be the next.

Eric brushed the disquieting thought aside and forced himself to look at the impaled remains.

Mottled strips of decomposed flesh decorated the lich. A skeleton face stared up, jaw open in a madhouse grin. Strings of white hair, long enough to reach the shoulders, created a mop-like effect around the skull. Only a few shreds of clothing remained, identifiable as denim pants and a tan bush shirt. Naked bones protruded from disintegrating hiking boots. Patches of gelatinous brownish-green mold sullied large areas of the body.

One fleshless hand clutched a leather-bound book.

Eric let out a low moan. He recognized that book, knew it as surely as he knew it was Wade lying at the bottom of the pit.

I should be right next to him, skewered and dying the way he did.

Everything he'd experienced—the dreams, the letters, the force compelling him to throw caution to the wind—all of it with one purpose.

To kill me.

But why? Eric stared down at his dead brother and wished he would speak, reveal the secrets he'd kept all these years.

The book.

Hope surged in Eric's chest. Wade's notes. The answers would be in there. The leather strap and metal buckle holding it closed looked intact, despite decades of exposure to the elements.

He leaned farther over the edge. Could he climb down? A closer look...

Earth gave way under his hands and knees and he pitched forward. A dozen spikes loomed beneath him, promising a slow, painful death.

Then he was on his back, staring at the same gray sky Wade had contemplated for so many decades.

"Jesus, Dad, what were you thinking?"

"The book. We have to get it." Even as he spoke, he understood he'd been tricked again. Whatever wanted him dead hadn't given up yet. Which only made him need the answers even more.

"It's too dangerous. We can't get down there."

"No." Eric struggled to sit up, pulling free of Arthur's grip. "Wade's secrets, they're in that book. He wants me to have it."

"That's crazy."

"I have to." Eric stood up. The world tilted and Wade's voice whispered, *"Just one more step."*

Arthur stepped in front of him, put his face close.

"Dad, listen. It's this place. We have to leave. Now."

Eric saw fear in his son's eyes, a barely-controlled terror that did more to break through his insane need than any pleading words.

What if it wants us both dead?

He couldn't let that happen. Discovering the truths he sought wasn't worth his son's life. Whatever unwholesome things his brother had uncovered would have to remain a mystery.

At least for now.

Eric looked at Arthur and felt like he was seeing him for the first time. His son really had grown into a man.

That man deserved to live.

"You're right," he said, feeling a sense of relief he saw echoed in Arthur's eyes. "Let's go home."

This time Arthur led the way, giving the pit a wide berth. Eric glanced back only once. The dark hole already lay unseen in the deceiving mists, once again waiting to engulf the unwary.

I'll come back for you, Wade. And next time, I'll be prepared. I'll bring you and your secrets home.

Deep in the forest, a primordial bellow challenged his promise.

Windows to the Soul

He checked the gun to make sure it was loaded. Images floated across his field of vision, obscuring his hands as they opened and then closed the revolver's cylinder.

The eyes. They were with him all the time now. Following him everywhere. Old, young, happy, sad.

Black.

He had to go back there. He had to stop them.

The eyes.

The *eyes.*

****

Travis Jones didn't know why he walked into the antique shop on South Broadway, but almost before he realized what he was doing he'd opened the door and stepped inside.

Cool air, slightly musty and with a hint of spice and leather, wrapped around him, drying the sheen of sweat the hot, muggy, summer day had left on him. For a moment everything seemed to be dark shadows against a black background until his eyes adjusted to the dim interior.

A tiny bell tinkled over the door. A voice came from somewhere amidst the tables and shelves filled to almost overflowing with the leftovers of long-dead individuals.

"I'll be with you in a moment. Please feel free to look around."

Although he couldn't see the speaker, Travis got an immediate impression of him. An ancient fellow, stooped and beginning to lose hair that had long since gone gray. He'd be wearing small half-glasses, a short-sleeved button down shirt with a knit vest, and black dress pants covered in dust.

Where the hell did that spurt of imagination come from?

Shaking his head, Travis browsed through the over-crowded aisles, idly picking through a haphazard assortment of dishes, jewelry, silverware, postcards, books, and records piled between the larger pieces: typewriters, cameras, vases, and even statues. All of it sat on tables and chairs that looked

old and worn enough to be antiques themselves. None of them carried a price tag.

"How can I help you today?"

Travis nearly dropped the small figurine he'd been examining.

"Whoa, you startled me." Turning around, he found himself facing the owner of the cigarette and age-sanded voice he'd heard earlier. The man looked surprisingly similar to how Travis had pictured him, with the exception of the red bow tie he wore and the fact that his half-moon glasses hung from a silver chain rather than sitting atop his roundish head.

"My apologies. All this clutter tends to muffle the sounds of footsteps." He held out a pink, pudgy hand. "Allow me to introduce myself. Charles DelRojo, owner of Things Out of Time."

Travis gave the soft hand a quick shake. "Travis Jones. I didn't see any sign outside."

DelRojo smiled, a slight upturning at the corners of his small, moist lips. "It hasn't arrived yet. I've only just opened today; you're my first official customer."

Travis raised an eyebrow. "First official customer? What are unofficial customers?"

The small, squat man gave short laugh. "This location is new for me, Mr. Jones, but I've been in the business a long, long time. Many of my customers follow me from location to location. It's a hard business, antiques, but one that can be quite lucrative if you build up a loyal customer base."

"Well, I hope your business here is as good as your last one."

"No doubt it will. This area, all of the Lower Hudson Valley in fact, is a treasure trove of collectibles and mementos from long ago." He held out one arm, indicating the depths of the store. "Now, is there anything in particular I can interest you in?"

Travis shrugged. "Actually, I'm just looking. I saw the store and...well, I guess I just wanted to stop in and check it out."

"Excellent! My window displays drew you in. I work hard on those, you know."

Travis glanced at the assorted objects piled in front of the two wide shop windows. Books sat on top of clothes, a case of spoons rested against a two-foot high replica of Rodin's 'The Thinker,' and a yellowed shark jaw hung from one horn of a bronze Viking helmet.

DelRojo gave another one of his hurried laughs. “Yes, I know, it looks like I’ve just piled things wherever they fit, but believe you me, there’s a rhyme and reason to how everything is placed in this store.”

“I’m sure there is. Well, I guess I’ll be on my way. Nice talking to you, and good luck with the store.”

“Thank you, Mr. Jones. And do come again.”

“I sure will.”

Travis headed towards the door, smiling to himself. *The guy’s wacko if he expects anyone to believe this room full of junk has any rhyme or reason to it.*

His hand was already turning the door handle when he noticed the book on the window ledge, half-covered by a moth-eaten Chinese-print silk bedspread.

Much as it had when he first entered the store, his body seemed to act on autopilot, turning and leaning forward to withdraw the large tome from its hiding place.

He placed the tome on a nearby table. About the same size and shape as a briefcase, it was wrapped in dark leather that felt slightly greasy to the touch. No design or writing decorated its worn surface. A small metal lock held the book closed.

Travis ran a hand across the top, his fingers shaking slightly as they touched the cool leather. Warring compulsions battled inside him; the desire to see what was inside versus the urge to pick up the book and throw it as far as he could, just get the hell away from it.

“Ah, so something caught your eye after all.”

This time Mr. DelRojo’s voice didn’t scare him. It was almost as if he expected the man to return to his side.

“This book, what is it?” *What’s inside it?* was the real question, the one he couldn’t get out.

“Well, there’s only one way to know that, Mr. Jones,” DelRojo said, answering the unasked question. “Open it.”

“Open it?” Travis’s stomach flip-flopped at the thought.

“Yes.” DelRojo produced a ring of keys, all shapes and sizes. With no hesitation, he selected one seemingly at random and inserted it into the keyhole. There was a small click.

“There. *Open it.”*

Travis’s hands pressed against the oily leather and he lifted the cover. He

inhaled sharply, a reflexive action, and his heart beat faster in response to the adrenaline coursing through his bloodstream.

Pictures decorated the first page, each one mounted against the black background of thick paper.

"It's...a photo album."

"Yes, indeed!" DelRojo patted one soft, damp hand on Travis's arm. "People often leave mementos or photographs mixed in with their other items, and we do not discriminate in what we sell. In fact, there are many collectors of photos, old letters, even blank postcards. Look through them. Who knows, maybe you'll see someone you know!"

Chuckling to himself, DelRojo wandered away, his stout legs carrying him into the darker recesses of the store.

Travis stared at the pictures, more than a little annoyed at himself for building up such anticipation for a stupid photo album, as if he'd expected it to be a signed classic or something.

The photographs were ancient and faded. A few were black and white, but most were the brown and white type he associated with Wanted posters from the movies about the Old West. All of them seemed to be of random people; no two showed the same faces. People of all ages; some posing, some apparently captured going about their daily business.

Something caught his attention on one and he looked closer. The eyes were solid black, no white showing at all. Flipping through the pages, he found all the photos had the same kind of effect. One set of black eyes after another looked back at him.

That's weird.

"Mr. DelRojo?" Travis looked around, but the squat proprietor was nowhere to be seen. After calling for the man a few more times, he gave up and left the store.

For the rest of the day a single thought kept returning to him, accompanied by the memory of the strange eyes. An old phrase kept running through his head, something his mother used to say.

The eyes are the windows to the soul.

****

The eyes followed him everywhere. He ran and ran, legs pumping, head down, body covered in sweat, but he couldn't escape them. Closer and closer, more and more of them. Pure black yet somehow he could see them against the night sky. He stumbled over something, fell to his knees. The eyes closed in on him and suddenly the faces were there as well, faces from another era. Even without seeing the clothes or hairdos you could tell they weren't modern faces.

Now it was if the people had holes where there eyes should be. He could see the dark sky through them. A dozen, two dozen, three. All gathered around him. Hands out, begging, pleading.

What did they want?

Leave me...

"...alone!"

Travis came awake, sitting up so fast the covers flew off him. He looked back and forth in the dark room, expecting to see the disembodied faces floating on all sides. He fumbled for the bedside lamp, knocking over his glasses and the cup of water he habitually kept there. Only when he'd banished the darkness did his heartbeat slow, the adrenaline slowly draining from his system.

"Jesus Christ."

He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a nightmare so realistic, so terrifying.

His hand shook as he reached down to pick up the glass. A small amount of water remained at the bottom and he gulped it down, the tepid liquid cutting a trail across his parched tongue.

He spent the rest of the night on the couch, every light on and the television tuned to an all-night sports station.

****

He had the dream again the next night, and the night after that. Each time the result was the same: he woke up screaming and disoriented. By the third day he was barely able to function at work.

"Christ, Travis, you look awful." Fred Meyers eyed him up and down. "Tie one on last night?"

Travis shook his head and poured his fourth coffee of the morning. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, trying to erase the gritty, tired feeling. "I wish. I've been having this nightmare, the same one every night. It's getting so I'm afraid to fall asleep."

Meyers nodded, his bushy eyebrows coming together over his nose. "My oldest had bad dreams for a week last year. Turned out he was anxious about starting a new school. The dreams stopped after his first day."

"Yeah?" Travis tried to feign interest in the older man's story.

"You betcha. Psychologists say nightmares are the subconscious's way of processing something you're afraid of. Once the fear is removed, the subconscious can get back to normal dreams about porn stars and orgies."

He flashed Travis a lewd wink and left the break room, whistling an old Beatles' tune.

Subconscious fears?

The memory of the sepia-toned photos with their black eyes returned to him.

The dreams started the same night I visited that store. All I have to do is go back and see that they're just pictures. That should take care of everything.

****

The melodic chime of the bell announced his entrance. Travis was barely four steps into the dim interior when DelRojo's cheery voice greeted him.

"I knew you'd be back." He held the photo album in his hands.

"I need to see them again," Travis said, reaching for it.

DelRojo grinned, his cherub face lighting up as he pulled the book away. "I'm sure. But you can't. Not until you pay for them."

Travis shook his head. "No, I don't want to buy them. I just need to check something. I won't take up any of your time."

"I'm sorry." The elderly shopkeeper shook his head. "If you want to see them again you must purchase the album and all its contents."

"Fine." Travis took out his wallet. "How much?"

"Two thousand dollars."

"What? Are you crazy?"

DelRojo pursed his lips. "Mr. Jones. Insults are hardly necessary. The price

is based on the value of the item."

"Go to hell."

Another smile. "Too late."

Travis shook his head. "You're nuts." He turned to leave. Two thousand dollars? A shrink would take care of his nightmares for half that price.

"They're a part of you now." The shopkeeper's voice took on an ominous tone. "It starts with the dreams but soon you'll see them all the time. They'll haunt you until..."

Against his will, Travis found himself responding. "Until what?"

DelRojo shrugged. "Until you either make them yours or they make you theirs."

Travis walked out without answering. What could he say? The man was obviously a mental case.

He was halfway to his car when the eyes appeared again, floating in the air, keeping pace as he walked.

Two pairs. Then two more.

All afternoon, as he sat on the couch watching television, they appeared and disappeared, sometimes just a few, sometimes so many they filled the whole room for minutes at a time, blocking his view of everything else until he was ready to scream.

All the while, DelRojo's words kept coming back to him.

"Until they make you theirs."

****

Travis crushed his hands against his eyes, desperately trying to block out the black orbs that tormented him from every angle.

It had been two days since he'd last gone to work; three since he'd been able to sleep. He'd made another trip to see DelRojo but the squat store owner had only laughed and raised his price to five thousand dollars.

Cash.

That was when Travis remembered the gun. He'd inherited it years ago from his father. Since then it had been sitting in its shoebox on the top shelf of a closet, packed away behind spare pillows and blankets.

Waving his hands in a futile attempt to drive away the disembodied eyes that

plagued him, he took down the shoebox.

He checked the gun to make sure it was loaded. The spectral images haunted his field of vision, obscuring his hands as they opened and then closed the revolver's cylinder.

They were with him all the time now. Following him everywhere.

He had to go back there. He had to stop them.

The eyes.

The *eyes*.

****

The cab let him off and he tossed a handful of bills to the driver, hoping it was the correct amount. He hadn't trusted himself to drive; he could barely see through the mass of ocular hallucinations orbiting around him.

DelRojo was waiting just inside the door, photo book in hand, his supercilious grin stretching across his pudgy rabbit cheeks.

"Good morning, Mr. Jones. Have you come to make payment?"

"In full." Travis pulled the gun from his jacket, aimed for the sound of DelRojo's voice through the sea of eyes. His finger jerked the trigger twice, the small revolver hardly kicking.

DelRojo stumbled backwards into a table of antique lamps and crashed to the floor, accompanied by the sound of breaking glass. Splatters of bright red blood mixed with rainbow-colored glass shards to create abstract death art on the dusty shop floor.

Travis grabbed the tome from the shop keeper's limp hands and hurried from the store, his field of vision reduced to a few feet. At the next corner he caught a cab and returned to his apartment.

Clutching the heavy book against his chest, he staggered through the doors of his building and into a waiting elevator. When he arrived at his apartment he closed and locked the door behind him and collapsed onto the couch.

Pairs of eyes in all sizes and shapes swirled around him as he opened the album to a random page and tore out the first sepia-toned photo he came to, a random shot taken on a long-ago city sidewalk.

The figures in the picture slowly changed from shades of brown to full color, the eyes shifting from darkest black to bright, life-like blues and greens and

browns.

As he watched, the people in the photograph turned as if looking right at him. As one, the crowd moved towards him, growing larger and larger.

A large man in a brown coat reached out to him.

Travis tried to drop the photo but a strong hand grabbed his wrist.

****

The pudgy elderly man paused in the hallway and tipped his old-fashioned bowler hat to a woman heading for the elevator. He waited until the doors closed before approaching a certain apartment.

Withdrawing a jangling, overcrowded keychain, he selected a key and opened the door.

On a low coffee table in front of an L-shaped couch was a large photo album. Several pictures were scattered on the glass.

The man gathered them up and placed them inside the album. When he closed the cover, a tiny click sounded as the silver lock engaged. He started to turn away, and then noticed one more picture lying on the glass.

The black and white photo showed a young man in fashionable glasses sitting on a couch.

DelRojo shook his head.

"The eyes *are* windows to the soul, Mr. Jones. But some windows shouldn't be opened."

Trapped

What does Hell sound like?

For me, it's a keening whistle, the demonic cry of a prehistoric metal beast approaching in the darkness. It is the sobbing of the dead, the screams of the dying, and the thunderous, pounding roar of a thousand tons of steel appearing out of nowhere.

It is the sound of the iron beast hunting me in the permanent night of the tunnel, waiting for that moment when I am just a footstep too slow, a stride too far away from safety.

Odds are, it will get me. If it doesn't, one of the walking dead will. But I haven't given up hope. I only have to make it to morning. I will fight to the end, try my best to escape the Stygian passageway in which I've become trapped.

I don't want to die like the others.

****

The park ranger leaned against his SUV and stared at us. "You folks made a wise decision visiting the ghost tunnel during the day, that's fer sure. Don't want to be in there at night."

He paused to put a stick of cinnamon gum in his mouth. Even from four feet away, the red-hot scent of the gum assailed my nostrils. "Bad things go on in there at night." He smiled, winked at the girls, and then climbed into his truck. Tossing a wave at us, he drove off.

Tanya turned to me and Jeff. "And you want to go visit this, this Flinder-whatever place?"

"Flinderation," I said. "The Flinderation Tunnel. Don't listen to that guy, he was just pulling your leg. I've been in dozens of these things, and I've never seen anything more dangerous than a spider."

It was true. Jeff and I had visited every railroad station, train trestle, and train tunnel from New York to Ohio, all in the name of research for the book we were doing. What had started as a grad school thesis had morphed into a full-blown book deal, and the publishing company was paying us decent bucks. The least we could do in return was carry out a thorough investigation. So,

after we'd finished our research, we'd decided to take the summer and visit all the places we'd mapped, armed with camcorders and digital cameras.

Jeff put his arm around Stacy. "Seriously. It's gonna be like every other place we've been to. Pop in, take some pictures, and then head to the nearest bar."

We'd met the girls a week ago, and they'd decided to accompany us during our visit to West Virginia.

Who were we to complain?

Stacy and Tanya looked at each other, then shook their heads and smiled. "Fine," Tanya said, looping her arm through mine. "Let's get this over so we can have some real fun."

After a long drive, a short hike, and then a walk down the closed railroad tracks, our arrival at the Flinderation Tunnel was anticlimactic, to say the least. We came around a gradual curve and Jeff pointed up ahead. "There it is."

We approached the dark hole, Jeff and I in the lead. No strange sounds echoed out to us, no ghostly figures waited to lure us in.

"This is it?" Stacy asked.

"Told you," Jeff said. "No big deal." He took out his camcorder and started filming, while I began snapping pictures of the entrance. Once we were done, we stepped inside.

The moment we entered the tunnel, something changed. The temperature dropped twenty degrees, the afternoon light seemed unable to penetrate very far, and a wild, hostile odor assaulted our noses.

But beneath all that was something worse, something that wrapped cold fingers around my bones and dug into my stomach with razor-sharp ice. It took me a moment to recognize the feeling.

Fear.

"Jesus, this place stinks!" Jeff covered his nose and mouth with his free hand.

Stacy and Tanya grabbed hands. "Rick, I don't like this. Can we go now?" In the near dark, Tanya's face was a pale moon with two black craters where her eyes should have been.

I was all set to say yes, when I noticed something in the light from Jeff's camcorder.

"Jeff, are you filming that graffiti?"

"Yeah, wicked, isn't it?" He seemed unaffected by the dread that had my hands trembling.

The strange drawings on the stone and brick walls were more than wicked; they were possibly the strangest things I'd ever seen. No phone numbers, no lovers' names, no threats about Satan coming for us. No gang symbols.

Just faces, screaming, terrified faces with black spots where the eyes should have been. I flicked on my flashlight and approached one. Rather than painted on, the picture seemed to have been burned right into the rock. I waved my flashlight down both sides of the tunnel.

They were everywhere.

"You think the ranger would've mentioned this," Jeff said, coming up to stand next to me.

"Yeah." I didn't know what else to say. Something about those faces—those eyes—had me frozen in place. I couldn't look away.

How long we stayed like that, I have no idea. Maybe forever, if Stacy hadn't spoken up.

"Guys, I don't feel so good. I think I'm gonna be sick."

"All right, let's head back to the car and we'll..."

Something about the way Jeff's voice trailed off made me look up from turning my camera off. Right away I saw what the problem was.

The circle of light marking the tunnel's entrance was gone.

Night had fallen.

"Everyone come here," I said, wondering to myself how we could have possibly been standing there so long. It had to have been hours, but it seemed like only minutes had passed. "Grab hands, and we'll follow the tracks out." At that point, I wasn't worried about anything attacking us, I was simply afraid of someone tripping on the tracks and getting hurt in the dark.

Gravel and cinders crunched underfoot as I stepped forward, using my flashlight to guide us. I was so intent on our path that I never noticed the figure in front of us until it spoke.

"They're coming."

My heart slammed against my ribs and I jumped back a step. Behind me, one of the girls let out a small scream and Jeff cursed. I brought the flashlight up, illuminating the source of the gruff voice.

A scream of my own rose up in my throat and stuck there, unable to force its way out.

His body dangled from the top of the opening, swaying back and forth at the end of the rope looped around his neck. His head hung to one side, but the eyes were wide and staring at us, two white orbs against the man's dark skin. His clothes were torn to shreds, and even in the shaky beam of my flashlight I could see the red welts covering his body.

He raised a hand and pointed at us. His mouth fell open, exposing a swollen tongue. "Run."

That was when my scream escaped.

We turned and ran deeper into the tunnel, no longer holding hands, everyone shouting and cursing at once. Tanya fell. She cried out in pain, but I didn't bother asking her if she was alright. I just grabbed her arm, hauled her up, and forced her to keep running. I tried aiming my flashlight forward, but between my arm moving and the two people in front of me, it did little to illuminate anything for us.

The darkness made it impossible to know how far we ran, but it couldn't have been long before we heard it.

A long, mournful whistle, a sound that should have evoked memories of times past, but instead froze my blood and set my stomach churning.

A train was coming.

"What the Hell?" Jeff stopped running and the rest of us had to swerve to the sides so we wouldn't crash into him. "This track is supposed to be abandoned."

"It's the train, the ghost train," I heard someone say. It took me a moment to realize it was me.

"Bullshit," Jeff shouted, turning to face me. Just then, the whistle sounded again, coming from the direction we'd been running towards. This time I heard something else in it, something hidden beneath the piercing whistle. The terrible wailing of a thousand tortured souls crying out their pain and anguish.

"We gotta go back," I said. Next to me, Tanya moaned, from fear or pain I couldn't tell. Stacy just stood there, her face as white as a winter moon.

Tanya clutched at my arm. "That, that *thing* is back there."

Before I could answer, a bright light appeared behind Jeff. At the same time, a sudden vibration ran through the tracks, shaking us where we stood.

"Hurry! We have to find one of the cubbys!" Clutching Tanya's hand, I ran back the way we'd come, only this time I kept the flashlight aimed at the side of the tunnel. I was searching for a cubbyhole, one of the safety areas the

workers would have carved out so they could get away from the tracks when a train came through.

Behind us, the light grew brighter and the vibrations stronger. A thunderous noise filled the tunnel as tons of iron and steel bore down on us. The whistle sounded again, its deadly call so loud it seemed as if the engine was mere steps behind us. My stomach convulsed, and warm, sticky fluids ran down the backs of my legs, but I didn't slow down.

Three more steps and my flashlight revealed what I'd been praying for. A cubbyhole, only yards ahead and deep enough for all of us to fit in. I tried to run faster, pulling Tanya with all my might. As soon as I reached the cubby, I dragged her inside next to me and turned to light the way for Jeff and Tracy.

Only they weren't there.

I cast the light further down the tunnel, spotted them a dozen paces back. Stacy was on her knees and Jeff was trying desperately to pull her up.

"Stacy!" Before I could stop her, Tanya jumped past me and ran back to her friend.

"Tanya! No!"

Everything happened so fast after that. The train, a bellowing, steaming behemoth whose cow-catcher glowed lava-red, barreled into them. For the briefest instant I saw the three of them frozen in time and space, their bodies rendered translucent, skeletons clearly visible, as if the train's headlamp was the world's most powerful X-ray machine.

Then they were gone and train was heading directly at me. I fell back into the cubby, pressed my back against the cold, slimy stone wall.

The train roared past, its details blurred from speed and the billows of cold fog surrounding it. But some of the cars had windows, and in them I saw the source of the whistle's tormented cries.

Faces, dozens of faces, all stretched into hideous masks of pain, mouths opened in unending screams.

I closed my eyes before the last cars went by, unable to look at the agonized expressions any longer.

But not before I saw Jeff, Tracy, and Tanya in one of the windows, their once-happy faces already molded into tortured caricatures of humanity.

Hot winds washed over me and tiny meteors of gravel and sand burned holes in my exposed flesh. The bestial din of steel on steel seemed to go on forever.

Then it was gone.

I stayed on the ground, my body curled in a fetal position, until I was sure it wasn't coming back. Then I slowly sat up. I felt around with my hands and eventually located my flashlight. A couple of shakes and it came on. The light made me feel a little better, but even then it took me a while before I felt confident my legs would support me. When I finally did stand, I crept to the edge of the cubby and looked in both directions.

"It'll be back for you."

I stumbled back from the voice, tripped over a railroad tie, and landed hard on my ass. Bringing the flashlight up, I shined it into the cubby.

A headless man in torn work clothes stood there.

"There's no escape. It'll keep comin' back 'til it gets ya."

I jumped to my feet and ran. The thing's laughter followed me, until another sound drowned it out.

The sound of the ghost train coming back.

Once more I sprinted down the tracks until I found another cubby. Once more I pressed myself against the stones, only this time I kept my face turned away from the hellish locomotive, and my hands pressed tight over my ears.

Since then the train has gone by two more times. I don't know where the next cubbyhole is, or even if there is one. So I haven't moved, except when I use the flashlight to check for ghosts. I haven't seen any more of them, but I know they're out there.

I can hear them.

They laugh and argue and call for help. The hanged man, the headless rail worker, and who knows how many others. Sometimes I hear things moving, scratching. Gravel and cinders grinding under stealthy feet. But when I look, nothing's there. I pray it's only rats.

I haven't given up hope, though. As long as nothing chases me from my hiding place, I can wait right here. Just a few hours; just until morning. I will not die like the others.

I give my flashlight another shake. The bulb is sputtering, growing dimmer.

And the sounds are getting closer.

And the laughter is getting louder.

The Great Zombie Invasion of 1979

It was Elmer Dinkley who first spotted the zombies exiting the woods and heading across Charlie Muckler's cow pasture.

He knew right away what he was seeing. After all, it'd only been a couple of days since he and Selma had taken their monthly ride into Haddysville to do the shopping. While there, they'd caught the afternoon picture show at the Rialto. It'd been one of those scary movies Selma liked so much, filled with walking dead people who ate brains and sounded a lot like Selma's cousin Jimmy Ray, the one with the weird head and the goofy eyes.

"Holy Christ on stick," Elmer said. "Charlie, looks like you got more'n cows in your field."

Charlie Muckler came to the porch door, holding two cans of ice-cold beer in his hands. "What's that you said?"

"Git your gun, you damn fool!" Elmer shouted, rising from his chair. "It's goddamn zombies, like in that movie I was tellin' you about."

"I think you got zombies on the brain," Charlie said, but he put the beers down and joined Elmer at the porch railing.

"Lookit how they're walkin', all stupid-like." Elmer pointed to where more of the undead were emerging from the trees

"Mebbe they's just drunk." Charlie squinted his eyes, then remembered the glasses tucked into the top pocket of his stained overalls. He put them on, and then frowned. "They don't look right, do they?"

"I told ya. Get the guns. You gotta shoot 'em in the head if you wanna kill 'em."

"Let's just make sure 'fore we start killin' folks. Last thing I need is Roy Biggins haulin' my ass off to jail 'cause you thought you saw monsters."

"Jumpin' Jesus! I forgot about Roy. We gotta let him know. Delbert!" Elmer raised his voice, calling for his eldest son.

"Yeah, Pa?" Delbert came out of the barn, struggling to button his shirt. Charlie's boy, Nate, tagged close behind, zipping up his jeans. Ordinarily, Elmer would've given the boys hell for messin' with the livestock, but there was no time for that.

"You 'n Nate gotta get Sheriff Roy and bring him out here fast's you can. We got zombies!"

"Huh?"

"Elmer, I think we oughtta—"

"Shut up and take another look," Elmer said, cutting off Charlie midsentence.

Charlie did, and let out a startled gasp. Although the strangers were still several hundred yards away, there was no disguising their torn clothing or the suspicious dark stains on their shirts and pants.

"Sonuvawhore."

"Now you believe me?" Elmer didn't wait for an answer. "Delbert, tell Roy we'll try to hold 'em off long's we can."

"You want us to run all the way into town?" Delbert asked.

"Yes, and hurry your asses, 'less you want those brain-eaters to catch you."

"What if there's more in the woods?" Nate asked, his face so pale his freckles stood out like chicken shit on snow.

"Dammit, boy, lookit how slow they are," Charlie answered. "You kin run faster than them with one leg. Now git!"

The two boys took off down the dirt driveway, already moving at full speed by the time they went past Charlie's ancient Ford pickup.

"I'll git the guns."

"Bring more beer, too," Elmer said, opening a can. "Once we start shootin', we ain't gonna have time to get it."

"Smart thinkin'."

"That's why I'm the brains around here," Elmer muttered to himself as he watched the zombies, which by then were close enough that he could make out their features.

Of the thirty or so shambling, stumbling corpses that had come out of the woods, all but a handful were covered in blood. Although he couldn't hear them, Elmer saw their mouths moving, and in his head he heard the gibberish noises the monsters in the movie had made as they shuffled through the streets, searching for human brains. Just like those movie creatures, the zombies in Charlie's field walked like they were still learning to use their feet. The lumps and bumps in the pasture, hardened by several nights of autumn frost, seemed especially troublesome. Every once in a while one of the corpses would trip and fall, and several leaned on each other for support, like drunken sailors after shore leave.

Covered in dirt, with torn clothing and mussed-up hair, it was easy to picture them digging themselves out of their graves and attacking unsuspecting people

in their houses. Elmer wondered how many of his friends were already dead or turned into monsters, and if he'd have to put them down, too.

"Ain't gonna catch me by surprise," he said, tossing the empty beer can into the yard, where it joined dozens of its relatives. "No dirty zombie's gonna eat my brains."

The screen door slammed open as Charlie shouldered through, his arms filled with an assortment of battered, rusty rifles and shotguns. Boxes of ammunition bulged in his pocket.

"Which one you want?" he asked, dropping the guns between the two rocking chairs.

"Start with the rifles," Elmer said. "Remember, you gotta hit the head, or else they's just gonna get up again. We'll save the shotguns for the close up work."

"Gotcha." Charlie handed over a long-barreled 30-06 rifle.

"Hey, ain't this my gun?"

"Yeah." Charlie loaded a clip into a vintage Browning Automatic Rifle he'd snuck into the States after the Korean War. "You left it here t'other day when we was jackin' those deer."

Elmer paused in loading his gun and stared at Charlie. It was no secret the other man had been after Elmer's Remington since the day he'd seen it in Elmer's truck back in '68. In fact, he'd tried to steal it twice before. For a moment, Elmer considered putting a bullet in Charlie's head.

I could always say he turned into a zombie and I had to do it. Then he remembered the two dozen or so real zombies that by then were halfway across the pasture. He needed Charlie's help.

I'll deal with him later. Maybe next time we're hunting he'll have one of them 'unfortunate' accidents they's always talkin' 'bout in the newspapers.

"Lookit their faces."

Lost in his thoughts, it took Elmer a moment to understand what Charlie was talking about. Then he noticed how pale all the dead people were and he laughed.

"What'd you expect, you moron? They's dead! Shit, looks like some of 'em is starting to go green already."

"They's gettin' closer." Charlie was nervously fingering his rifle.

"Yep. I think we got just enough time for 'nother beer before we gotta start shootin'."

"Holy muther-fucking-moly, I fergot the beer!" Charlie set his gun down and hurried back inside.

"I swear," Elmer called after him, "you'd forget you goddamned ass if wasn't stuck to your legs."

Charlie returned with a large bucket piled high with beer cans. "Yeah? Well, I ain't the one that couldn't finish fifth grade."

Pulling the tab on a Falstaff, Elmer glared at his long-time friend. "I coulda finished if I'd wanted to. Jes' so happened I had better things to do."

"Like what? Git drunk with your daddy?" Charlie snorted laughter and beer foam.

"No, mister funny man. I had me some big plans back then. Coulda made me some money, if anyone'd listened."

"Yeah? Well, now the only thing you can write is your name, and you can't read worth a shit."

"Readin' and writin' ain't important. Hell, Einstein couldn't read or write, you know."

"Really?"

Elmer gulped down more beer and belched. "Sure as shit. And he's so famous they put his face on posters now."

"Damn."

"That's right. It's ideas that's important, and I got a million of 'em. You stick with me, we're gonna be rich some day, too."

"Just like that Einstone fella?"

"Richer." Elmer pointed at the zombies, who were less than two hundred yards away by then. "You see them fuckers? Think how famous we're gonna be when people find out we killed 'em all and saved the town. We're gonna be goddamn heroes. Prob'ly get to meet the President."

Afraid Charlie might ask him who the current President was, Elmer finished off his beer and tossed the can over the rail, then waved his gun at the zombies.

"Hey, you fuckers! Get ready to taste hot lead!"

To his surprise, several of the zombies reacted, pointing at him and waving their arms.

"Shit," Charlie said. "They seen us."

Noises reached them from across the field, garbled sounds and words like when Gladys got the phone lines mixed together and all you heard was static and pieces of different conversations.

"What are they sayin'?" Charlie asked.

"Beats the shit outta me. I don't speak zombie." That set them both to laughing. Elmer opened another beer, placed it on the railing, and raised his gun. "You ready?"

Charlie nodded and knelt on the warped planks of the porch, using the railing to support his rifle. "Ready."

Elmer fired a round and one of the zombies, a fat man in a bloodied suit, went down, his head exploding like a rotten tomato.

"Gotcha, motherfucker!" He could barely hear his own shout over the ringing in his ears from the gun's explosive report. Another blast sounded, making him jump, and Charlie let out a war cry as a second zombie tumbled over.

"Wahoo! I got one!"

Elmer swallowed a mouthful of beer and then fired again, sending a third zombie to the ground. This time, the others finally reacted. Several of them stopped walking, while others frantically waved their arms back and forth. All of them were making their strange zombie sounds.

"It's like they's tryin' to talk," Charlie said, as he fired again. The bullet caught a tall man in the arm and spun him around. He fell, but almost immediately got to his knees and started crawling in the opposite direction.

Elmer threw his empty can at Charlie.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"The head, dummy. I told you, ya gotta hit the head or they don't die."

"I'll git him this time." Charlie fired another shot, and the injured zombie collapsed, red goo spraying from its shattered skull.

Elmer's next shot went wide, and he cursed. "Now you got me all messed up."

"Sorry."

Taking careful aim, Elmer sighted in on a skinny woman wearing tan pants and a matching jacket. Except for the grave dirt on her face and in her hair, and the blood stains on her shirt, she might've been pretty. Even from this far away, he could tell she had nice titties. He pulled the trigger and had time to see a black hole appear in her forehead before she fell.

"Got the bitch that time."

Charlie dropped another and then paused. "How come I don't recognize none of them? If they's coming from the graveyard, shouldn't we know 'em?"

"You know everybody buried in the graveyard? Besides, how do we know

where they came from? Could be from another town, or maybe some kinda secret military base. That's what happened in the movie I saw."

"They sure is scared now. Lookit 'em run!"

Elmer fired two more times and a fat zombie lady with a big purse tumbled over. Many of the zombies were moving in different directions. Some had even turned and were heading back to the woods. "Yup. Guess they ain't all stupid. We better shoot faster, or some might get away. Then they'll just make more."

Charlie's gun went off three times, and two zombies fell. Elmer took two more down, aiming for the ones running away. Only a few were still moving forward, screaming their gibberish as if someone alive could understand it.

The two men paused to reload, and Charlie asked how the zombies make other zombies.

"All they gotta do is bite you," Elmer said, after chugging down another beer. "You get all infected, and then you die. Couple hours later, you wake up again like them." He pulled the trigger and what had once been a young boy went down, the left side of its skull blown away. A heavyset female zombie went to its knees next to the little one, and fell on top of it.

"Damn," said Charlie. "They even eat their own kind."

"They're worse than animals," Elmer agreed. "How many are left?"

Charlie put his gun down and counted, folding over a finger for each one. "One, two, three, four..." When he reached ten, he made a mark on the railing with his fingernail and then opened his hands again. "One, two...two plus ten is twelve."

"They's almost out of range. We're gonna have to go after 'em with the truck. Grab the shotguns." Elmer set his rifle down and picked up the beer bucket.

Two minutes later they were bumping across the pasture, Charlie hootin' and hollerin' behind the wheel, Elmer in the pickup's bed, a double-barreled shotgun loaded with double-ought buckshot under one arm. With his other hand, he was alternately hanging on to the open cab window and drinking a beer.

"Here comes number one!" Charlie shouted, pulling up alongside an old woman who was trying to run in high heels.

Shows how stupid they are, Elmer thought, as he dropped his beer and raised the shotgun.

"pOmoshh!" the zombie shouted. Bruises and bloody cuts covered her dead flesh.

Elmer pulled the trigger and the monster's face disappeared in an explosion

of red.

"Wheeha!" Elmer hollered, then had to drop the gun and hang on with both hands as Charlie wheeled the truck around in a long, skidding slide and headed after another. The shotgun went off, blowing a four-inch hole in the rusted side panel of the bed.

"Watch out, you fuckin' moron!" Elmer pounded on the roof of the truck. "You're gonna get me kilt."

"Sorry!"

Elmer reloaded the shotgun, feeling a strong temptation to put a round into the back of Charlie's head, except that would probably just lead to the truck overturning. With a sigh, he grabbed his beer, which was rolling around and spraying foam all over the bed of the pickup. After sucking down the last remnants, he banged the empty on the roof.

"Pass me another!"

He grabbed the beer from Charlie and then dropped it as the truck approached another corpse, this one a middle-aged man wearing his burial suit.

"Time to die for good, motherfucker!" Elmer brought the shotgun up as Charlie slowed the truck.

"Net pozhalujjsta! Net—"

The rest of the zombie's garbled words disappeared as heavy buckshot tore its face away, sending skin, bone, and brains across the dark soil. In the cab, Charlie whooped again and threw an empty can at the headless body.

"Head for the trees," Elmer called out. "We'll get the furthest ones first and then come back for the others."

Charlie gave him the thumbs up and sent the truck bouncing down a row. Elmer opened his beer, laughing as the highly-shaken can sprayed foam across the top of the truck and through the back window.

"Watch it!" Charlie let go of the wheel and wiped at his sopping neck with both hands, flinging beer suds everywhere.

"Jesus, look out!" Elmer made a grab for the edge of the truck bed as the old pickup hit a rut and slewed sideways, but it was too late. A second bounce pitched him out of the truck, his gun and beer close behind.

He hit the ground hard enough to knock his breath away, could only watch as bald tires crunched over dead grass and semi-frozen soil inches from his legs. Then the truck was past him, skewing wildly from side to side as Charlie

fought to get control. Elmer tried to call out, but all his lungs produced was a raspy croak.

"Son of a bitch," he muttered, each word accompanied by a wheezing noise. He got to his knees and picked up his beer, figuring a cold drink would ease his tight chest.

Movement to one side caught his eye, and he looked up to see a man standing not five feet away.

Not a man! A zombie!

"Huh-huh-huh-" the thing said, as it reached towards him with bloody hands.

"Oh, no, you ain't eatin' my brain!" Ignoring the rocks and sticks that cut at his palms, Elmer crawled to his gun, thanking the Good Lord it hadn't gone off when it hit the ground. Although it only took a few seconds, he imagined the creature coming up behind him, its bacteria-filled mouth open and ready to bite. When he reached the gun, he didn't even bother standing, just turned and fired.

The zombie was further away than he'd expected, but it didn't matter. The load of buckshot caught it right where the neck and shoulders met and blasted the head clean off the body. It hit the ground and rolled over, ending up facing Elmer. The eyes blinked several times and then went still.

"Goddamn!" Elmer let out a laugh. "Popped him like a cork!"

The roar of an unmuffled engine alerted Elmer to Charlie bringing the truck around.

"I lost the goddamn muffler!" Charlie yelled, as he pulled up.

Elmer's already frayed temper gave out as he realized his old drinking buddy had no idea of what he'd done. Instead of climbing back into the truck, he stuck his shotgun through the window. Charlie cried out as the barrels smashed against the bridge of his nose.

"You dumb fuck!" Elmer shouted. "You almost got me killed! I oughtta blow your drunk-ass head right off'n your shoulders!"

"Hey, I'm sorry!" Charlie held his hands up. "I came back soon's I saw you were gone."

It took all of Elmer's control to stop his finger from tightening on the trigger, especially when he recollected that Charlie'd stolen his favorite hunting rifle. But a quick look at the field showed several more zombies left, and he'd need Charlie to help him kill them all.

Then it's his turn.

"Never mind. Let's finish this before they make it back to the woods."

They managed to put down the rest of the zombies without any further incidents, and by the time they finished, Elmer was sufficiently drunk to reconsider his private vow. After all, he and Charlie had helped themselves to each others' stuff plenty of times over the years. Including their wives. Besides, good drinking buddies were a lot harder to come by than guns.

Back at Charlie's house, Elmer stacked up the guns while Charlie went inside for a bottle of celebratory hooch he kept for special occasions.

"It's the good stuff," he said. "My cousin made it just last week."

"Hell, yeah." Elmer sat down in his rocker. "Now all we gotta do is wait for the sheriff to get here."

Charlie's voice barely reached from inside the house. "You think we might get a reward or—gaah!"

The sound of glass breaking accompanied Charlie's startled shout, but Elmer didn't pay much attention. Charlie was all thumbs when he was sober; after a dozen or so beers, it'd be surprising if he didn't drop something. Hopefully, it wasn't the sour mash.

Then a loud, pain-filled scream cut through the air, and Elmer knew something was wrong.

Very wrong.

After grabbing a shotgun from the pile, he made his way slowly down the narrow, windowless hallway. Something thumped and bumped in the kitchen, and more glass broke. Gun up and ready, Elmer jumped the last few feet, hoping to surprise whoever—or whatever—was in there with Charlie.

Sure enough, one of the zombies was kneeling on the floor, fresh blood on its mouth and hands.

"Shoot it!" Charlie shouted.

Elmer didn't hesitate. His finger pulled one trigger, sending a load of buckshot into the creature's head, which blew apart like a watermelon filled with dynamite.

The headless body fell over with a thud, and Elmer turned his attention to Charlie.

"What happened?"

Charlie let out a groan and shook his head. "Goddamn thing got me when my back was turned. It said something in zombie-talk and I hit it with the bottle. Then you came in."

"Did it bite you?" It was obvious something had happened. A big, red stain covered one shoulder of Charlie's shirt.

After a brief pause, Charlie shook his head. "Uh, no. It got me with its nails. Like fightin' a cat. But it didn't bite me. Tried to, but I held it off."

Elmer stared at Charlie but the other man wouldn't meet his eyes. "Uh huh. That's good." Relief showed on Charlie's face at Elmer's words, and Elmer knew the truth right then. He'd been friends with Charlie more than long enough to recognize a lie.

It bit him. That means it's only a matter of time now.

In the movies, the people who'd been bitten usually lasted a couple of hours before they changed.

But who knew how long it took in real life?

"Here, lemme help you up." Elmer pulled Charlie to his feet. "Since you busted the damn sour mash, what else ya got?"

"Got some grain under the sink," Charlie said.

"Get it. I'll clean this mess."

Elmer waited until Charlie's back was turned.

Sorry, old friend.

He fired the remaining round, scattering pieces of Charlie's skull across the cabinets and windows. Charlie's body landed next to the zombie's. Elmer racked another two rounds into the gun, just in case there was more undead things walking around, and then decided he needed a drink before doing anything else.

"Guess you won't be needin' this no more." Elmer opened the cabinet. "Sonovabitch," he muttered, spotting a second bottle of sour mash next to the moonshine. "He was gonna hold out on me after I saved his life. Figgers."

Elmer tipped the bottle up and took a long swallow. He was contemplating what to do with the bodies when the wail of a police siren sounded outside. A moment later, a car door slammed and Sheriff Roy Biggins came in, his pistol out and his eyes dancing back and forth.

"Holy shit, Elmer! What the hell happened? Your kid told me some kinda bullshit about zombies."

"You better sit down, Roy. It's all true."

Biggins shook his head. "I ain't got time for bullshit, Elmer. Got a big emergency on Route Forty. Goddamn busload of tourists headin' from Atlanta to Nashville smashed into a semi loaded with bug spray. I got ten dead and

about thirty Russkies missing."

"Russkies? What the hell you talkin' about?"

"Russians, you idjit. Some kinda tourist thing. Can't imagine why we're lettin' those red bastards into the country, prob'ly gonna blow somethin' up."

A nasty feeling set Elmer's belly to rumbling. Route Forty was just to the other side of Charlie's property. Right past the woods where the zombies had come from.

He thought of the dead bodies littering Charlie's field. One, maybe two corpses wouldn't be so bad. Roy could cover those up as hunting accidents. But more'n twenty?

That spelled electric chair in Elmer's book.

Only one thing to do.

"Shit, Roy, look out behind you!"

Biggins turned and Elmer fired the shotgun. He felt a moment's remorse at killing an innocent man, but better one more dead than being arrested for murder.

"Now I can blame the whole thing on Charlie. Say he went nuts, talkin' about zombies, and started killin' all those people. Forced me to drive the truck. When he shot Duggan, I had to kill him. I can still be a hero."

He had to make it look right, though. That meant moving the bodies and putting a gun in Charlie's hands. He knelt on the floor to grab Biggins' legs, felt a sharp pain in his hand.

"Goddamn!" He'd cut himself on a piece of broken glass. A good slice, too. Bleeding like a stuck pig. He put his mouth over the cut as he stood up, then paused at a noise from outside.

"Who's there?" The last thing he needed was another cop walkin' in.

But it was Delbert and Nate who entered the kitchen, still breathin' hard after runnin' back from town. Nate's eyes went wide and he pointed at Elmer.

"Holy Jesus, Del, you're Pa's a zombie!"

"Shit!" Delbert raised his hands, and for a moment Elmer though the boy was gonna throw something at him.

Until he saw that Delbert held a rifle.

"Del, no, I—"

There was an explosion, and Elmer had time to wish he'd finished the last of the mash.

Then everything disappeared.

Where Have You Gone, David Mullins?

It all started with the dog.

David Mullins woke up on a Friday morning that seemed the same as any other day. His alarm went off. The sound of the shower running told him Karen was already using up all the hot water. The smell of coffee trickled in from the kitchen. Max lay across his feet, snoring softly.

Pulling himself out from under the six-year-old Chocolate Lab, David swung his legs out of bed and sat up. He rubbed Max's head while the dog stretched and yawned.

"'Morning, Max," David said, his voice still rough from sleep. He automatically bent down to pet Snacks, their Yellow Lab, who preferred to sleep on the floor.

Except Snacks wasn't there.

"Snacks?" David got up, walked around the bed. "Snacks, where are you?" Thinking the dog—who *was* ten years old, after all—might have gone to the back door to be let outside, David headed down the hall and into the kitchen.

No Snacks.

A quick search of the entire house yielded the same result. Feeling more than a little anxious, David peeked into the bathroom, where his wife's form was barely visible through the cloud of steam and the opaque shower curtain.

"Karen, have you seen Snacks? I can't find him anywhere."

"What?" The curtain opened a few inches and Karen peeked out, her black hair covered in suds. "What can't you find?"

"Snacks. I woke up and he was gone."

A confused look crossed her face. "Who's gone? And why do you need a snack?"

"No, the *dog*. Snacks."

"The dog is right behind you. And I still don't get what snacks have to do with anything."

David looked down. Max sat by the door, staring up at him. He turned back to Karen. "Not him. The *other* dog. Snacks."

Karen gave an exasperated sigh. "Another dog? Feeding this one is expensive enough. Now, if you're done with your joke, I'm gonna be late." She yanked the curtain closed.

Max whined and looked towards the kitchen. His signal he needed to be let out.

Confused beyond words, David opened the back door. As he did so, he noticed there was only one bowl on the floor, with the word 'Max' printed in colored dog biscuits across the front. Perfectly ordinary.

Except yesterday there'd been a matching bowl with Snacks' name.

For the rest of the day, David fought to concentrate on his work. A thorough search of the house had turned up no evidence Snacks had ever existed. It had, however, caused an argument with Karen, who finally told him to either stop acting like an asshole or go see a shrink.

At the office, the first thing he'd done was grab the photograph he kept on his desk. He'd taken it last summer, a shot of Max, Snacks, and Karen all standing on the beach at sunset.

Only now Snacks wasn't in it.

"I can't be imagining you, can I?" he asked the empty space next to Max. "I remember you so clearly." He did, too; everything from bringing home the fluffy ball of fur when Snacks was just eight weeks old to the hikes in the woods they'd taken to the way the dog snored at night when it lay on its back. The time Snacks had swallowed one of Karen's rings and they'd had to wait three nerve-wracking days before it passed through his system.

But a search of the veterinary records at home had turned up no papers for Snacks at all—not even annual vaccinations.

Am I going crazy? David asked himself.

By the time five o'clock rolled around, he'd decided to pretend nothing was wrong; the last thing he needed was for Karen to ship his ass to the psych ward. She seemed happy enough to accept his explanation he'd had a particularly vivid dream, so real he'd still believed it after he woke up.

"That's what you get for staying up late and eating cold pizza while you watch the game," she said, before going back to chopping vegetables for dinner.

Sleep was a long time coming that night. He kept glancing down, expecting to see Snacks lying next to the bed. The idea that he'd never see the dog again, had never had a chance to say goodbye to his old friend, brought painful tears to his eyes, but he waited until Karen was asleep before letting them flow.

Even then, he made sure to muffle his sobs in his pillow.

****

The first thing David did upon waking up Saturday morning was check the floor.

Still no Snacks.

He carefully got out of bed and grabbed his sweatpants from where he'd dropped them the night before. Saturday was Karen's day to sleep in, usually until about ten, so David always did his best to sneak quietly out of the room when he woke up. He waved to Max to follow him, feeling another sharp pang of loss as he realized they'd be taking their morning walk without Snacks. He was already at the bedroom door, waiting for the dog to pad past him, when something caught his eye.

Karen's side of the bed was empty.

David's body twitched and a sick feeling roiled up in his stomach.

Calm down, he told himself. *She probably got up to pee or something.*

Except when he checked, she wasn't in the bathroom.

His nausea growing worse by the second, David ran through the house, calling his wife's name. When she didn't answer, he hurried to the front window, hoping she'd simply woken up early and gone outside to get the newspaper from the driveway. It didn't matter that she hadn't gotten up before him in close to twelve years of marriage. There was a first time for everything, right?

However, the newspaper still sat at the bottom of the driveway. David turned away from the window, and then looked back as he realized something was missing.

Karen's car.

Relief and anxiety fought each other in his stomach as he returned to the bedroom. Maybe she'd risen early and decided to surprise him by going out and getting bagels or donuts. Maybe she'd still been pissed at him about the whole Snacks thing and decided to take a drive. Hell, maybe she'd left in the middle of the night to go fuck her boss. At that point, David didn't care, as long as she still existed.

As long as she wasn't gone from the world, erased from everyone's memory except his.

"Think logically," he said to the empty bedroom. "First things first." He picked up the phone and dialed her cell. Waited through one ring, and then another.

"The number you have dialed does not currently belong to—"

David slammed the phone down. "Bull-fucking-shit! It does belong to a subscriber!"

Somebody's screwing with you.

The thought popped into his head, and he latched onto it with eager mental fingers. Why—or how—someone would be doing this to him he couldn't say, but it explained everything, and made more sense than he'd suddenly gone insane.

It's like in the movies, where bad guys systematically erase a person from the grid.

They'd started by taking his dog, and removing all the evidence the dog had ever existed. Pictures, papers—easy enough to do while he'd been asleep, or at work. Getting the veterinarian's office to say they'd never heard of Snacks would have been harder, but if enough money was spread around...people would say anything.

What about Karen? And your parents?

That was harder to explain, but not impossible. Drugs. Brainwashing.

Body doubles.

The possibility hit him like a cement block. He'd been thinking that whoever had done this to him had kidnapped Karen, like they'd done to Snacks. But what if the kidnapping had occurred days, or even weeks, ago?

What if he'd been living with a stranger who only looked like his wife?

He looked around the room. All the photos of he and Karen were gone. A quick check revealed no pictures of her anywhere in the house, or in his wallet.

"She disappeared overnight," he said. He'd always done some of his best thinking out loud. "It would have been easy for her to get up and sneak out. A lot easier than if people had come in and taken her away. She could have even grabbed the pictures on her way out."

Pictures, yes. But not all her clothes.

David's head snapped towards Karen's closet. Before he knew it, his feet had him moving towards the closet door. With a shaking hand, he turned the knob.

His breath escaped in a quiet gasp. Karen's clothes were gone, replaced by

an assortment of suits, dress shirts, and sports jackets—the same ones he normally kept in the spare bedroom's closet, since Karen's work clothes took up so much space.

"No. It's impossible." David dashed across the hall and threw open the closet door in the room he'd converted to a small office.

Storage boxes filled the space, stuffed with college memorabilia, photo albums, and comic books. He recognized them as the ones that should have still been in his parents' basement, the ones they kept asking him to take to his own house, but that Karen insisted they had no room for.

The room went blurry and spun around him as his eyes lost their focus and the strength drained from his legs. Holding onto the wall for support, he let his body slide to the floor until he was sitting with his back against the wall.

Thoughts swam in his head like fish fighting against a whirlpool tide, tossed against the rocks of impossibility.

Who would do this? Why me? What did I ever do to anyone?

The more David thought about it, the less sense everything made.

The phone rang, the sudden noise making him twitch.

Karen! He pushed himself to his feet and ran into the bedroom.

"Hello?"

"Oh, good, you're home." His mother's familiar voice, full of her usual good cheer. "Your father and I were wondering if you'd like to have dinner here tomorrow. The LaMonte's are coming over, and Sally will be with them. I know you hate being set up, but she's such a nice girl, and Dorothy says she's got a bit of a crush on you—"

"Mom, stop." David waited until he heard silence on the other end. "Forget Sally. What happened to Karen?"

"Karen? Karen who? Have you been holding out on us? Have you met someone? When are you going to bring her over? Not tomorrow; that would be rude. What about Monday? We can—"

"Mom, sorry, I have to go. I'm, um, in the middle of something for work. I'll call you later." He hung up before his mother could ask any questions.

It's not a plot. No amount of money in the world could get my mother to pretend Karen didn't exist. The happiest day in her life was when I told her I was getting married.

That left only one possible explanation.

I'm going crazy. This is all some kind of psychotic break with reality, it's

not happening at all. For all I know, I'm in the nuthouse right now, wrapped in a straightjacket and drooling all over myself.

Although he'd only been awake for less than an hour, David's eyelids suddenly felt as if they had ten-pound weights tied to them. His arms and legs were lead anchors, threatening to pull his body to the floor. It took all his strength to stumble across the room and fall onto the bed.

His eyes closed before he could even move his head to his pillow.

Maybe when I wake up, everything will be normal again.

Drugs.

The word rang in David's head like an alarm clock, and he opened his eyes, all his stress-induced exhaustion gone. A quick glance at his bedside clock showed he'd been asleep for close to eleven hours; outside, the sun was already setting. Next to him, Max snored in blissfully ignorant doggie sleep, his nose twitching ever so slightly as he sniffed at something in his dreams.

Is it over? Did I—

Drugs.

That word again. Why had it woken him from such a sound sleep?

Wait.

That's the explanation for everything. Someone's been drugging me. I just took an eleven-hour nap, for chrissakes. Whoever's doing this probably doped me up the last two nights. Maybe Karen and the dogs, too. That would explain how they were able to come in and change everything in the house. And then they brainwashed my family.

But why?

David rubbed his eyes and sat up as a new thought occurred to him. *If something gets taken away every time I'm drugged...*

He looked around the room. Since it wasn't Max, that left family and friends. Who would it be? His parents? Jim, his best friend?

The phone sat on the nightstand. David stared at it, his heart beating wildly. He knew he had to start calling everyone he knew, but a feeling of dread filled him, prevented him from picking up the phone. As long as he didn't make the calls, he could pretend no one else had disappeared.

Max snorted and rubbed his face with a paw, rolled over to place his head on David's leg. He looked up at David with sad, brown eyes, as if to say, "I'm here for you."

"I know, I've got to do it, don't I?" David rubbed the dog's head. "All right."

The first call went to his parents. They were both home, him mother still somewhat perturbed about the abrupt way he'd ended their last phone call. After promising he'd explain everything later, he dialed Jim, who said he'd love to talk but he was on his way out the door to meet a date.

Calls to his other friends revealed they were all safe and accounted for.

So what happened while I was unconscious?

David sat on the bed, phone in hand, pondering the question. *Think, David. If this was a movie, what would happen to the unlucky hero next? They've taken his dog, taken his wife. What else...?*

My money!

Fear raced through his body like a cold chill. He dropped the phone and ran into his office, where the computer sat waiting and ready. A few clicks and he was accessing his online banking site.

His fear grew worse.

Half the money they'd had in their accounts was gone.

Then he noticed something else. The account only had his name on it, not Karen's.

They didn't just take her, they took her money. That spoke of a much bigger conspiracy than drugging and kidnapping.

What the fuck is going on?

A floorboard creaked in the hallway, and David let out a startled gasp as he spun around in his chair, certain he'd be facing a shadowy figure with a gun.

Max stood in the doorway, tail swishing back and forth. He whined.

Taking a deep breath to try and slow down his overworked heart, David stood up. "Sorry, boy. I'll bet you're hungry, right? I haven't fed you all day. C'mon, I'll fix you a nice, big dinner."

At the word 'dinner,' Max's tail went into overdrive, striking the doorframe with rapid thumps. David went to the kitchen, flipping on the lights along the way. After preparing an extra-large bowl of dog food for Max, he stood by the window, staring out at a neighborhood that suddenly seemed ominous despite its normal appearance. Who knew what secrets were lurking out there, waiting, watching...

Watching.

Oh, my god. Why didn't I think of it before? Whoever's doing this has to be watching me. They might even have cameras hidden in the house, be listening in on all my phone calls.

He'd already decided not to call the police, because they'd just think he was crazy. *But now I couldn't call them even if I wanted to.* They *would know.*

He couldn't just sit there and wait for them to come to him, though. *So where can I go? Someplace safe, someplace where they couldn't possibly watch or listen in on me?*

It came to him that there was only one place: work. *I have a key. Even if my work computer and phone are bugged, they can't be monitoring every desk in the whole building. I'll just use someone else's cubical. Search the internet. Do...*something!

Five minutes later he and Max were in the car and heading across town.

Two blocks away from the five-story building where he worked as a web designer, David pulled into a McDonald's parking lot, figuring anyone watching the house probably had some kind of tracer on his car as well. Which meant driving to work would be like turning on a big neon sign saying 'Here I am.'

That meant he had to ditch the car. He'd chosen the McDonald's to kill two birds at once—covering his tracks and filling the empty hole in his belly from not eating all day. He used the drive-thru, unwilling to leave Max in the car alone, and then parked in the back, between two dumpsters. After sharing a sack of cheeseburgers with Max, he snapped a leash on the dog and headed down the sidewalk, doing his best look like nothing more than a man taking his dog for an evening stroll.

On the off chance he was being tailed, he took the roundabout way, first going in the opposite direction, and then looping back towards his building only when he was sure no one was following him. Even then, he looked both ways several times before sliding his access card into the slot next to the door.

His hand was already pushing against the glass before he realized the lock hadn't buzzed.

Thinking he might have had the card facing the wrong way, David double-checked the position of the stripe and slid the card again.

The tiny light over the reader stayed red.

"Now what?" The secret forces that seemed bent on destroying his life couldn't have gotten the company to change everyone's pass cards since Friday. And there was no way Tom McCormick, owner of Future Designs, would ever lock his employees out, not when half of them preferred to come in

at night to work on their projects.

He slid the card a third time. The light remained red.

"Shit." David peered into the building, hoping he might see a security guard doing rounds. He knew them all; any one of them would let him in.

Then he saw the sign over the receptionist's desk and understood what had changed during his day-long nap.

Future Designs no longer existed.

David stared at the Elements Publishing sign for a long minute before accepting defeat. Turning around, he shook his fist and screamed at the empty road.

"You win! Do you hear me? You win, you bastards! I give up. Do whatever you want to me, just finish it!"

His voice echoed off the dark buildings, a dozen Davids shouting their acquiescence into the night. No one answered. No trench-coated mystery men stepped from the shadows. His cell phone remained silent.

"Damn you to hell!" David kicked over the combination ashtray and garbage can where so many of his co-workers stubbed out their butts during smoking breaks. Max let out a startled bark and jumped back.

His mind empty of ideas, and with tears running down his cheeks, David returned to his car and drove home. This time he didn't go into the bedroom. Instead, he poured himself a large glass of soda, turned the TV on, and sat down on the couch. Since pieces of his life only disappeared when he was asleep, he was determined to stay awake all night, see if it made a difference.

No matter what happens, though, tomorrow I'll call the police. And I'll tell my parents everything. They'll probably lock me away in a padded cell, but maybe that's for the best. Maybe I really am crazy.

David woke to the sound of a fat man in a bad suit preaching about the glories of God and Heaven. With a groan, he righted his body from the awkward position he'd been in and fumbled with the remote until the TV went off. Seeing Max lying on the other couch sent a tiny thrill through him. Maybe his plan had worked! After relieving himself and letting the dog out, David picked up the phone, his vow from the night before still fresh in his mind. It was only seven-thirty, but his parents would most likely be awake.

"I'm sorry, the number you dialed is not in service at this time."

Cold foreboding washed over him. He checked to make sure he'd dialed the

correct number, then dialed again. Got the same message.

My parents...

Before his grief could overwhelm him, he dialed other numbers in rapid succession. His Aunt Mary. Jim. The guys on his bowling team.

Nothing.

In desperation, he tried every number stored in the phone's memory, and then did the same with his cell phone.

Not a single number worked, not even the pizza place he and Karen ordered take out from every Wednesday night.

He dialed 911. Forget reporting missing persons. He was going to ask them to lock him up.

"I'm sorry, the number you have dialed—"

"Motherfuckingsonofabitchcocksucker!" He threw the phone across the room and jumped up from the couch so fast Max barked and looked all around. David stormed into the bathroom, opened the medicine cabinet, and proceeded to toss bottles and tubes into the sink and onto the floor until he found the one he wanted.

He'd gone through a spell of insomnia the previous year, and his doctor had prescribed sleeping pills. David had stopped taking them after a week, though, because they'd made him feel dizzy all the time. He'd hung onto the bottle, mainly because neither he nor Karen ever threw anything out.

Forcing his shaking hands to work, he twisted and yanked at the childproof cap until it came open, and then tilted the jar over, dumping the pills onto his palm.

Only six? Hopefully that's enough to do the trick.

David crammed all the pills into his mouth and drank some water from the tap to wash them down. Returning to the living room, he sat down next to Max and gave him a hug.

"Sorry, boy, but it's the only way. I can't take it anymore. You'll be okay. You know where the doggy-door is. Don't let them get you, all right?" He lay back against the pillows. "Hell. Maybe you don't even exist. Maybe none of this has ever been real."

Max whined and nuzzled his head under David's arm and up onto his chest.

"I know. Real or not, I'm gonna miss you, too."

He continued talking to the dog, his voice growing softer and less coherent as the pills took effect, until finally his eyes closed and his head fell to the

side.

For the final time, David Mullins fell asleep.

Something roused David from his dreamless state. He fought to open his eyes, but their lids seemed made of lead. Squinting, he looked around the living room, trying to see what had disturbed him. Everything was blurred and indistinct, as if viewed through a dirty lens.

Max whined, and David turned his head just in time to see the dog sit up. He tried to reach out, but his hands wouldn't obey him. Instead, he was forced to watch as the dog, a confused look on its face, slowly faded away until it was gone.

"Max," David whispered, but it was too late. "Max."

A breeze washed over him, and he twisted his head, which seemed to be the only thing working. His kitchen was gone, the whole back of the house nothing but an empty space where walls and rooms and cabinets had been.

"Is it time?" he asked the empty room. He let his head fall back, unable to hold it up any longer. The shapes grew more unfocused, until he couldn't recognize anything anymore. Distant laughter, familiar somehow, reached him from the darkness outside.

"Karen? Is that you...?"

"Karen?"

The voice was vaguely familiar to David, but he couldn't place it.

From the other room, Karen answered. "In here. Did you bring breakfast?"

The living room moved around David, and he realized he was walking, but he couldn't feel his legs moving or his feet touching the floor. He told his body to stop, but nothing happened. The view changed, and he watched as his hand —but it wasn't his hand!—appeared, setting a bag of bagels on the kitchen table. A dog barked, and the strange-familiar voice laughed. "Easy, Snacks. You'll get yours. You know I never forget you guys."

David tried to look down but none of his muscles were responding to his commands. Instead, it seemed as if some outside force controlled him, leaving him a helpless bystander in his own body.

Footsteps came down the hall, and his head turned.

Karen! It *was* her, alive and well and more beautiful than ever. She approached him, and he recognized the gleam in her eye, the look on her face, knew she was going to kiss him before it happened.

A kiss he couldn't feel.

What's happening? What's going on?

"So, what's for breakfast?" she asked, moving away and opening the bag.

"Cinnamon raisin bagel for you, extra cream cheese. Toasted sesame for me. And one plain for the mutts to split," said the voice coming from him. It was a man's voice, but friendly and warm.

David wanted to cry. It was all so familiar—their usual Sunday breakfast, the pink T-shirt Karen always slept in, the sounds of the dogs' nails clicking on the linoleum.

All familiar, yet totally alien. Because he was seeing it through someone else's eyes.

But who was that someone?

It took all of fifteen seconds for David to get his answer.

"Dave, don't forget we're having dinner with your parents tonight," Karen said, around a mouthful of bagel.

"I know," answered the voice of the body housing David's consciousness. "I promise I'll be back from work on time. I just have to put the finishing touches on a site or McCormick will have my head tomorrow."

Dave? That's what she calls me. Called me. I don't understand! He has my life, my family, my job. Now he has my name*, too?*

David watched helplessly as his captor finished eating, got up, and went into the bathroom.

Yes! Now I'll see who it is. Then I'll be able to figure out...

His mental voice trailed off as he saw the other's face for the first time. Brown hair. Blue eyes. A strong nose, with a tiny bump on the bridge from being broken during a high school football game. Full lips that had a tendency to curl up at the ends, giving the mouth a perpetual grin. A small scar by the left ear, a souvenir from an ill-advised attempt to break up a fight between two dogs as a child.

He knew this face. Knew every line and crease, every patch of gray in the stubble, every blemish. He knew it because he'd seen it every day for thirty-four years, watched it grow and age.

It was David Mullins's face.

But it isn't *my face! That's not me. It's an imposter. It can't be me, because I'm here, trapped inside.*

In that second, something clicked in David's head and he realized why the voice he'd been hearing, the one talking to Karen, had struck him as familiar. *It's my own, but I'm hearing it the way it sounds to someone else, like when you hear yourself on a tape recorder.*

Movement by the doorway caught the other David Mullins's eye and he turned his head, forcing David to look that way as well. Karen stood there, one hand resting provocatively on her hip, a flirtatious smile on her face made all the more sexy by the tiny dab of cream cheese on her lip.

"If you hurry back, we'll have time to mess up the sheets before we go to your parents'." She gave him an exaggerated wink.

"I'll make sure I'm back," Other-Mullins said. Although he couldn't feel it, David somehow knew his face was returning her smile, the same way he would have done.

"Karen! Stop! It's not me! He's not me! Can you hear me? I'm inside, I'm here, the real me!"

Karen winked again and walked away, oblivious to David's desperate cries.

Other-Mullins brushed his teeth and then went into the bedroom. He opened the nightstand drawer, the one where David kept his socks and underwear. He pulled out a pair of white cotton socks, and then reached in again, this time pushing socks and briefs to expose a long, shiny carving knife. Other-Mullins ran his finger along the blade, more of a caress than a touch.

"Three more days," he whispered. "Then I'll be free of her forever." He covered the knife again and shut the drawer.

No! David wanted to take the knife and shove through the other him's heart. *He's going to kill Karen.* It didn't make sense. Why steal David's life only to kill the best thing in it?

I've got to do something. I've got to stop him.

He focused all his attention on Other-Mullins's hands, which were busy tying his sneakers. *Stop. Stop moving. Stop. STOP!*

For the briefest of seconds, the strange/familiar hands paused, fingers hovering uncertainly over the new Nikes David had bought just a week ago. Then they resumed their task.

David let out a silent sigh. His incorporeal mind hurt worse than any headache he'd ever had, but for the first time in days he felt a glimmer of hope.

He'd done it. He'd actually effected a change on the body holding him prisoner. A small change, but a change nonetheless.

Now he had three days to take control of Other-Mullins' body.

Ignoring the growing pain in his mind, David concentrated on the other's hands.

And prayed three days would be enough.

Armageddon 2020

At night we can see the glow of the Hellfire pits on the horizon; apparently it's a common sight across the globe. Chaos has finally prevailed.

It sucks.

****

Social media caused the end of the world. Not directly; there was no one specific incident anyone can point to and say "That's it! That's where the problems started."

But the ability to say anything, to react instantly, to share information and opinions and whatever shit happened to be on your mind instantaneously with the world... well, that's where I lay the blame. Not on our President, or Russia, or Osama bin Laden, or that crazy guy from North Korea, may they all be sharing a burning pit in Hell. See, they were just pawns like the rest of us, victims of a new social order that rose up from the bowels of the internet and not only warped the minds of the human race but also made them think it was okay to espouse those angry, bitter thoughts like they were gospel.

With nations divided, countries insulting each other, and extremism the norm, terrorism—both international and domestic—rose to new levels. In response, security everywhere got as tight as a virgin's... well, never mind. It was tight.

By the time we reached the midpoint of our reality-star president's term, flying had become a greater chore than moving to a new house. Multiple baggage checks, multiple check points, no pointed utensils—not even pens or pencils!—allowed on board... a nightmare.

The same kind of crap happened everywhere. Checkpoints at bridges and tunnels. Social media and TV news stations aflame as people vented and argued and just shouted for the hell of it. Books banned for "undesirable content" or "unpopular opinions." Everyone became a vocal minority until the only real minority voice was that of sanity.

The end result of all this is me ending up hiding in a cave in the hills outside of Jerusalem, counting down the final days of the world.

Did I mention how badly this sucks?

****

I doubt anyone will ever read these words, but in case someone survives this global mess, I want to leave a factual record for posterity. After all, who's in a better position to do it than me?

My name is Avery Stern. I am, or at least I was, a senior-level private security professional for one of the most exclusive firms in Washington, DC. I provided special assistance to the politicos on Capitol Hill, doing jobs too illegal for the police and too personal for the Secret Service. Our bread and butter is, or was, helping elected officials out of tight situations.

When a congressman's son got drunk and sideswiped a line of cars, I minimized the damage with liberally-deployed cash, vacations, and new car offers. When a horny frat boy date-raped a senator's daughter, I made sure he decided quitting school and serving his country in the Marines was a good idea. When someone needs an office bugged or a video of an elected official visiting a bordello, I took care of everything.

All at the taxpayers' expense, of course.

According to my boss, Clyde Jameson, sooner or later anyone with a career in Washington ends up using us.

So I was surprised—but not shocked—when our latest Secretary of State, Roger Baumann, seated himself across from Clyde and I one morning as we noshed on a late breakfast at the Fairmont. He murmured something into Clyde's ear about a 'priority job' and Clyde immediately pointed his fork, steak and fried egg dangling greasily off the end, at me. "Avery's your man."

Baumann nodded, turned to me, and whispered, "Tomorrow, seven a.m., top step of the Lincoln Memorial."

Without waiting for a reply, the tall, distinguished man, an alt-right hero and rumored presidential hopeful, got up and walked out.

I turned to my boss. "Clyde, what gives? I can't take on a new case. I'm up to my ears investigating Senator Maxwell's illegitimate family." I kept my voice low. In Washington, it isn't just the walls that have ears. Everything does. I know; I place a lot of them.

"Not anymore," Clyde said, polishing off the rest of his steak. "Consider this priority one. Secretary Baumann is someone we want to keep happy and your background makes you the best choice for the job."

I sipped my coffee. It wasn't the first time I'd had to switch gears midstream. Usually it meant a big bonus for me. I didn't know what in my background he was referring to, but it didn't matter. I'd find out soon enough.

Looking back, I have to wonder if things would have been different if I hadn't been free for breakfast. Or if I'd been born Catholic. Exactly how far back does Fate extend her intricate strands? Of course, by the same token, if things had been different I might not be alive to tell this tale.

Not that being alive is such a good thing these days.

****

Sunday morning, Secretary Baumann approached me at exactly seven. Moist fog filled the summer air in clinging waves. Because of the early hour, we had the whole monument to ourselves.

"Good morning, sir," I said, purposely not using his name or title. "How can I help you?"

Baumann glanced around several times, and I wondered just how much trouble he was in. Finally, he began talking in a low voice. Three sentences in, I started wondering how much trouble *I'd* be in if I laughed out loud. I mean, he sounded certifiably nuts. And yet his words chilled me in a way the damp air hadn't been able to.

His tale was a jumbled mix of Biblical portents, half-baked prophecies, and weird coincidences. The kind of stuff you usually only heard on the History Channel late at night. Strange events in the Middle East. Secret societies that murdered people. And then the pièce de résistance:

"I think my son, Chad, might be Satan's child."

Totally *meshugeneh*, my grandmother would have said.

But when he told me about the suspicious deaths surrounding his family ever since they'd brought the boy home from the orphanage, it got me thinking. Maybe someone had it out for him, was trying to drive him mad.

Pulling an Alfred Hitchcock, we call it in the business.

According to Baumann, a historian had turned up a bunch of ancient scrolls that supposedly revealed how Chad would come into his full powers the day he turned thirteen, and that he'd lead the final Armageddon.

His birthday was less than three weeks away.

I looked into Baumann's crystal-clear blue eyes and shivered. He seemed sane, yet he obviously believed the insanity of his words. He passed me a file, told me it contained all the information I'd need. As it touched my hand, sudden thunder boomed in the misty air and we both jumped. Baumann didn't wait to find out if I had any questions, just made another of his silent exits.

On the way back to my office, I found myself checking my rearview mirror more than usual. Other than a large dog that dashed out of an alley, bit one of my tires, and chased my car for two blocks, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Yet I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched.

If you want to survive in my line of work, you learn early to trust your feelings.

I made preparations to go to Israel, where I was supposed to meet the historian, and then spent the next two days reading and re-reading the file. It contained some bizarre stuff, and I don't mind saying it spooked me. Of course, nearly dying twice in freak accidents during that time didn't do much to alleviate my unease.

The first episode happened the day after I spoke with Baumann. A window fell from a fourth-story apartment, nearly decapitating me as I grabbed my morning cup of Starbucks. *That* sure as hell wakes you up. The next day, an old woman went after me with a knife while I was eating a sandwich at Saul's Deli around the corner from the office. She kept screaming something about ten thousand *dybbuks* on her left and right, but I was too busy avoiding her steak knife to really listen. Then, just as the police showed up, another one of those big, black dogs bounded into the shop, tore out her throat, and ran away, although it did pause long enough to snag my sandwich off the floor.

I didn't escape without injury, either. When she died, her bladder and bowels released all over my best suit. I'd have preferred a knife wound.

I'd met with Baumann on Sunday. Tuesday night, I landed in Jerusalem and checked into the Crown Plaza Hotel. Wednesday morning, I grabbed a taxi and gave the driver directions to some obscure archeological dig out in the desert. I had an appointment with Baumann's historian and his sidekick. A rabbi, of all people. By then, I'd figured that my father being a rabbi and me being originally from Jerusalem were the reasons I'd been chosen for the job. The desert in August. Lucky me.

I found Professor Rabinowitz hard at work trying to decipher a weather-worn stone tablet I presumed held some sort of historical significance. Or

maybe it was just a five-thousand-year-old menu. A guide led me through the maze of half-excavated structures, announced me, and then disappeared into the warren of clay buildings. A fifty-ish man in well-worn cargo shorts and matching shirt stood up, shook my hand, and greeted me with an accent that would have made Mel Brooks scream 'stereotype!'

"Oy, yes, yes, Mister Baumann told me you would be arriving today. Come, come. Rabbi Levinsky is waiting." Rabinowitz jammed a dirty leather hat onto his head, brushed some sand from a beard that would have made the fellows in ZZ Top proud, and led me inside one of the ancient structures.

Out of the sun, the temperature was slightly cooler, a refreshing ninety-five or so. The same tiny windows that prevented desert sand from blowing too heavily into the building also ensured almost total darkness. Candles and oil lamps placed throughout the dusty rooms and hallways provided just enough light so you could see what you'd just tripped over.

We found Levinsky at his desk, a rickety contraption banged together from crates and plywood. Reading a scroll, of course. He was smaller than Rabinowitz, smaller even than my own five-ten. Slightly built and dark-haired, he provided a grim counterpart to the professor's loud joviality. After a brief, scowling greeting, he motioned for us to sit down on some plain wooden chairs.

"What we are about to tell you will be hard to believe, Mr. Stern. But please, keep an open mind and hear us out."

This oddest of pairs proceeded to take turns telling me a wild story about the coming of the Antichrist, as foretold by a box of ancient scrolls Rabinowitz had unearthed. According to Levinsky, several signs detailed in the scrolls had already occurred: plagues of locusts, rivers turning to blood, the false king ascending to the throne. Real National Enquirer stuff. He and Rabinowitz had deciphered the portents, and they all pointed at Chad Baumann. They'd contacted the secretary and somehow convinced him they weren't insane, that the son of the Devil was indeed living in his house.

Did *I* believe? Not then, that's for sure. I'd seen some weird shit, and god knew the world was heading for hell in a handbasket, but I wasn't ready to label some poor kid as the Antichrist just yet.

Luckily for me, I didn't need to believe. All I had to do was deliver a package to Secretary Baumann, something they couldn't trust through a regular shipping company or courier. Levinsky informed me I should come back the

following day and pick it up. He needed to perform some type of cleansing ritual before he could turn it over to me. Whatever that meant. For the kind of money I got paid, I didn't mind being a glorified errand boy. I told them I'd return before ten a.m., local time.

One of Rabinowitz's assistants drove me back to the hotel, and aside from the cloud of vile-smelling, biting flies that attacked us and nearly sent us over a cliff, the trip was actually a pleasant one, thanks to the cold bottles of Maccabee ale he had in the cooler.

Back at my hotel, I washed off the dirt and grime in a cool shower, put some ointment on my bug bites, and grabbed a nice steak at the hotel's restaurant. No sightseeing for me. Holy Land or not, even after dark it was too hot and dusty to walk around town. All I wanted was more beer, my air conditioning, and a good night's sleep. I didn't even call any of the dozen or so relatives I still had in the city. What for? So I could tell them I didn't have time to visit, and then hear about it from my mother for six weeks after I got home? No thank you.

By eleven o'clock I'd finished three more beers and climbed into bed for a nice rest. Even the howling of the wild dogs outside the hotel didn't bother me.

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The next morning, I woke to find all my plans in ruins. Airport security had snagged a Palestinian terrorist trying to sneak a bomb onto an El Al flight. She'd hidden the plastique in a copy of *The Art of the Deal*. Her bag got through the X-ray machine but then the bomb-sniffing dogs went nuts as she approached the gate.

Mishtara Tsvait, the Israeli military police, cancelled all flights and closed the airport until the end of the week. That meant I was stuck for at least two more days. I placed a call to Clyde and he said he'd update Baumann.

After breakfast, I caught a cab to the dig, my nice, uneventful ride interrupted only by a rain of frogs. Okay, maybe not so uneventful, but a heck of a lot better than angry bugs with sharp teeth.

Things only grew worse after I arrived at the dig.

Rabinowitz and I found Rabbi Levinsky dead in his creepy cubbyhole. In fact, we walked in on the most macabre scene I'd ever witnessed up to that point in my life: three Rottweilers so large I'd have sworn they were small

ponies, busy tearing apart the rabbi's body. One dashed away, a *payis* and part of an ear dangling from its mouth.

The other two turned and bared fangs at us.

We grabbed shovels just in time to ward off their first attack, but both of us suffered more than a few bites before we killed the beasts. By then it was way too late for Levinsky. His throat gaped open and thick red blood pooled around his lifeless body, turning the dusty floor into crimson mud.

A bundle wrapped in heavy canvas and tied tight with rough string sat on his desk, my name written on it.

"Feh. This is a nasty business. There is your package," Rabinowitz said, pointing at the bundle. "Levinsky completed the ritual of cleansing last night. I will take care of his body. You must get yourself back to America as fast as you can, as soon as the airports open. The boy must be stopped before his birthday."

Sweat coated the professor's face and body, staining his already filthy shirt, and it wasn't just from the heat or our struggles. He looked damn scared. I told him he could count on me, and off I went with my package. I never once thought to open it.

None of my business, after all.

Other than the hooker I ordered, I spent the next two days alone in my room, eating room service meals and waiting impatiently for the airports to reopen. I wasn't superstitious, but the packs of dogs and cats pacing back and forth outside the hotel didn't strike me as normal.

On Saturday morning, I finally got a seat on a flight to the States. It was going to New York, not Washington, but I could catch the shuttle from Kennedy. Anything to get the hell out of this cockamamie town. I packed, checked out, and headed to the airport, my package stuffed in a bag from the hotel gift shop.

Security was extra heavy, but I'd expected that and ignored them as they searched everyone's bags.

Until Levitsky's package went through the X-ray machine and two guards shouted at me to get down on the floor.

I couldn't make out much of what they were saying, but I understood enough to catch the word 'smuggler.' With my face pressed against cold tile and a half-dozen guns trained on me, I tried to explain they'd made a mistake, I was a courier, bringing a package back for a client.

Imagine my surprise when they opened the parcel: a set of ancient, razor-

sharp knives.

What could I say? That I needed to get them home so the U.S. Secretary of State could murder his son, who just happened to be the devil? Instead, I told them Rabinowitz wanted me to bring them to his office in the States. More bad luck for me, though—when the chief of security called the archeological site to check my story, he found out the workers had just discovered the professor's dead body next to Levinsky's.

Now the police had me pegged for a murderer as well.

As my grandmother liked to say, I had a heap of *tsuris* on my shoulders.

Was I arrested? You bet your *tuchis*. None of my security clearances meant a damn.

So that's how I came to spend Chad Baumann's thirteenth birthday in a stinking, filthy Israeli jail cell. Secretary Baumann pulled all sorts of strings with the Ambassador to Israel, but governments work notoriously slow. *Too* slow, unfortunately for me, or the world. Three days after my arrest, Baumann suffered a bizarre 'accident.'

He spontaneously combusted during a live press conference.

They cut me loose, but it was too late. The world had already begun its express ride to Hell. Within hours, news channels were reporting the murders of the U.S. President and his staff, a terrorist-led nuclear attack on China, and sightings of strange creatures emerging from the earth all over the world.

I went back to the Crowne Plaza. It was the only thing I could think of. I stayed for as long as my credit cards worked, then they kicked me out. By that time, good ol' Chad had marshaled the forces of Hell to his side and the whole world knew the end was coming, thanks to constant TV and social media coverage.

People tried to resist the invasion, but any type of rebellion failed miserably. It turns out demons are, for all practical purposes, indestructible. Nukes work against them, but their excessive numbers and widespread presence rendered atomics a non-viable solution. Not that several countries, including a couple who weren't even supposed to have nuclear weapons, didn't try. All it did was delay the inevitable.

By the time the hotel booted my ass into the street, demons ran amuck everywhere except Israel. The Jews claimed it was a sign of the *Moshiach* or *acharit hayamimproof*, the Armageddon before the coming of the next Messiah, proof that Israel was the one true Holy Land. The Christians said it

was a sign Christ would return to the place of his birth and death to save the world from non-believers. Palestine declared the whole thing a ruse to steal their land.

Age-old religious tensions boiled over. The Israeli Jews banished the local Christians into the desert as blasphemers. In the U.S., fundamentalist groups sprouted like ephemeral plants and it was open season on religious leaders everywhere.

As for me, Momma Stern didn't raise a schnook. I stole a jeep and as many supplies as I could pack and schlepped out for the foothills. I knew the area well from my time as a teenager, when I'd been forced to spend several summers at *kibbutzes*, and it only took a few hours to locate a cave and set up camp.

Eventually, other people found their way into the hills as well. Soldiers deserting from the various services, expats, some desert folk. A band of strangers united by a common emotion: fear.

We've been sitting here for more than a week, waiting for the end. According to our little radio, it should be soon. A plane from the U.S. arrived at the airport yesterday. The few witnesses who survived the brief but bloody battle told of a teenage boy who exited the plane, accompanied by some very large and disgusting bodyguards.

Chad's first act was to execute all the local religious leaders. Slowly. That pretty much ended any talk about a new Messiah. The demons rounded up the remaining population and placed them in prison camps. Actually, they're pantries, but no one likes to say that aloud.

Sitting in my cave, I wonder if it's too late to do anything. I wonder where Levinsky's knives are, and if I can get to them.

And I wonder how different things might have been if social media hadn't turned the whole world into an angry mess.

Mostly, though, I just think about how much things suck.

R-Factor

"R-selected species, such as amphibians, invest their reproductive energies into producing many offspring, few of which survive to adulthood. K-selected species, such as humans and apes, invest their reproductive energies in fewer offspring, each of which has a better chance of surviving to adulthood."

– Karl Hannifin, former Associate Professor of Biology, University of Miami (2005).

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Tracy Sue Baker pointed a dirty finger at the ad in the Locahatchee Gazette. "Ray-Ray, listen to this: 'If you are a married couple under the age of thirty who has been unable to conceive a baby naturally, you may be right fer our study. Participants who are accepted will receive three hunnert dollars a month, plus free medical care fer two years.'"

Tracy Sue slapped the paper down on the stained and cigarette-burned card table, rattling the breakfast dishes. She wiped a sweaty hand across her equally sweaty forehead, pushing her limp hair away from her eyes.

"We's a married couple and we ain't thirty yet. An' three hunnert dollars is more'n you make in a month down to Willie's these days."

Ray-Ray shook his head, his long, greasy hair flip-flopping across his face and neck. He never looked away from the car race currently showing on their fifteen inch black and white television.

"Uh, uh. Ain't no doctor sticking needles in me just so's you can have a screamin' shit machine runnin' 'round here."

Tracy Sue clenched her hands, held in a scream. Yelling at Ray-Ray never did any good. You had to go slow and careful with him if you wanted anything.

Taking a deep breath, she grabbed two Keystones from the 'fridge. She handed one to Ray-Ray, then pulled the top back on hers and drank down half the beer in one long gulp. She moved the can to the back of her neck, the cold metal raising goosebumps on her steaming skin.

As far as Tracy Sue was concerned, nothin' was worse than July in Central Florida, what with the bugs, heat, and the smell of horse shit clinging to Ray-

Ray's sweaty body like mud on a hog. In her head, she was already laying down three crisp hundred dollar bills and walking out of Wal-Mart with two air conditioners for their double-wide.

But Ray-Ray wouldn't go for that. Instead, she had to reel him in the same way he and his friends did with the catfish down to Kreiger's Pond.

"You know, with three hunnert dollars we could buy us a new color TV, something big. And you'd have enough left over to get that fishin' pole you've had yer eye on."

Ray-Ray stayed silent, but she caught the way his left eye squinted down. He'd heard her, all right. And he was already thinkin' about that new pole.

"And it wouldn't just be one check. They'd have to pay us the whole time I was pregnant. That's nine months, Ray-Ray. Nine times three hunnert is..." she tapped a hot-pink fingernail against her beer can as she counted, "more'n twenty-five hunnert bucks!"

One of his eyebrows went up. The hook was planted. She got up and headed for the door, figuring he'd need about an hour to let things stew in his head.

Just before she walked out, she looked back and said, "Besides, who says we have to keep the baby after it's born?"

The screen door swung shut with its rusty squeal, but not before she caught sight of the small smile turning up the corners of his mustache.

Gotcha!

****

"Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Baker." Dr. Karl Hannifin entered the examination room, where Tracy Sue reclined on the cool upholstery of the gynecological table.

She wore a crinkly paper gown and had spent most of the morning with her legs up and spread so Hannifin and what seemed like half the world could peer into her womanly regions, as her mother liked to say. But she didn't care. They could film a movie in her cootch if they wanted, long as she got to relax in the near-frigid air conditioning of the clinic.

Ray-Ray sat in a nearby chair, thumbing through the latest issue of Bassmaster and turning down the corners of pages advertising fishing gear. Judging from the number of pages he'd marked, you'd think they were lookin'

at three *thousand* a month.

Of course, she'd heard stories 'bout how a white baby could fetch twice that much, if you knew where to sell it. And there weren't nothin' Ray's Uncle J-Bird couldn't fence or hock.

Maybe it was time to have J-Bird over for a few cold ones.

Hannifin waved a clipboard full of papers as he took a seat on a stool next to the table. "We've gotten the last of your test results back, and you're both perfect candidates for our program."

Ray-Ray smiled and closed his magazine. "So when do we get..."

"Get started?" Tracy Sue interrupted. "We've been waiting a long time to be parents." She'd warned Ray-Ray not to talk about the money, but of course he couldn't go ten minutes without thinking 'bout how he was gonna spend 'his' cash.

"Uh, yeah, that's right, Doc. Tracy Sue always wanted herself a big family. House ain't the same without a few rugrats tearin' around, ain't that right?"

Tracy Sue clenched her teeth but kept the smile on her face as Ray-Ray patted her leg with a grimy hand.

"Well, we'll be getting started as soon as you sign the consent forms. They basically say..."

"Don't matter what they say, Doc. We trust ya. Give 'em here."

Dr. Hannifin smiled and handed the clipboard to Ray-Ray. "Just sign by the 'X.' You too, Mrs. Baker."

Tracy Sue signed her name next to Ray-Ray's illegible scrawl, then passed the documents back to Hannifin, who peered through his thick glasses at their signatures before placing the clipboard on the counter.

"Excellent." The doctor's pudgy apple face beamed as he opened a small refrigerator and took out a tray with fourteen syringes on it.

He picked one up and held it to the light, tapped it, and looked again.

Tracy Sue felt a shiver run up her spine that had nothing to do with the cold air. "Hey, Doc, what are all those shots for?"

"Don't worry, Mrs. Baker." Hannifin gave a short chuckle, the extra skin of his jowls dancing in time to his laughter. "Just one quick injection. No worse than a flu shot."

He wiped her arm with an alcohol pad and jabbed the needle in with one quick motion. She never even felt it break the skin.

"Every two weeks you will return here and I will give you one of these

shots. This is the fertility drug you have agreed to try, in return for your payment."

"Oh. I thought, I don't know, it'd be a pill or something." Tracy Sue looked at her arm, where Hannifin had finished swabbing the site a second time.

"Tracy Sue, you said you'd do anything to have a baby, didn't ya? A few needles ain't so bad." Ray-Ray smiled at her over the magazine. Flecks of Cheez-Curlz from his lunch stood out like orange stars against the dark of his beard.

Keep smilin', butt-head. That first check is yours, but I got plans for the rest.

"Mr. Baker, don't think we've forgotten you." Hannifin removed another tray of labeled needles from the refrigerator. The fluid in these was pink instead of clear.

"Whoa, Doc. I gotta get a shot too?" Ray-Ray stepped backwards, until the wall stopped him.

"The fertility treatment requires enhancement of the sperm as well as the ova, Mr. Baker." Hannifin moved in close, swabbed Ray-Ray's arm just below the sleeve of his cut-off flannel, and drove the needle home before Ray-Ray could object.

"Hey!"

"Anything for the baby, right, *honey?*" Tracy Sue made sure to give him an extra big grin.

"Shuddup." He rubbed his arm and glared at her.

"Now, Mrs. Baker, it's important that you both return exactly every fourteen days for your shots. You'll also be getting a complete examination each time, so we can monitor the baby's growth."

"What about our money?"

"Er, yes, Mr. Baker. After each appointment, you'll stop at the front desk and pick up a check for one hundred fifty dollars."

"Let's go, then!" Ray-Ray stood up, tucked his magazine into the back pocket of his overalls.

"I gotta get dressed," she reminded him.

"Well, hurry up. I'll meet ya out front." Smiling and whistling, he hurried out of the office.

"Two weeks, Mrs. Baker," Hannifin gave her a look, as if he thought she was as dumb as Ray-Ray.

"Don't worry, Doc. We'll be here."

****

Tracy Sue noticed the first changes ten weeks later, right around the time Dr. Hannifin said she would. She hadn't had any pregnant cravings yet, which she guessed was good, seein' as they only had fish, beer, and Beef-a-Roni in the house. She supposed she could always go to her momma's and raid the 'fridge, if need be.

She was getting ready for their trip to the clinic when she caught sight of herself in the bedroom mirror.

A definite bulge had overtaken her previously flat stomach. She ran her hands over it, tracing the gentle curve that began above her belly button and ended just above the Lynyrd Skynyrd tattoo Ray-Ray called his 'go sign.'

Once a month or so, after a few beers, he'd drag her off the couch and into the bedroom. "Gimme the go sign, baby," he'd say, as he undid her pants. As if his goin' down on her with his filthy beard and mustache was the highlight of her night.

Now, if she looked straight down, her stomach actually hid the tattoo.

Damn. I'm really pregnant.

She'd seen her momma go through it, with little Janey, and both her sisters had been poppin' out kids for years. Six reasons right there why she'd always made sure to take her pill every day. She hadn't exactly found their pregnancies attractive. Their sunken eyes, rashes, and mood swings made getting' knocked up seem a lot less pleasant than on TV.

But now she felt different. Healthy. Happy, even. Maybe it was the vitamins Dr. Hannifin had her taking. Her mirror showed a young girl whose sandy hair had more life, whose cheeks were rosy instead of pale, and who was fillin' out her bra better than she ever had.

The longer she thought about it, the more she actually wanted this baby.

How could she have ever considered selling it?

When they arrived at the clinic that afternoon, Dr. Hannifin seemed pleased with her progress as well.

"You're looking excellent, Mrs. Baker. Right on schedule."

"I don't know, Doc, she's gettin' pretty fat," Ray-Ray said, as he rolled

down his sleeve.

"A healthy baby needs a healthy mother, Mr. Baker. Nutrients, vitamins, balanced meals. A baby can't grow if it isn't fed."

"But I ain't eatin' any different," Tracy Sue said. "And it's like my stomach just grew overnight."

"Don't worry, my dear. You're just right. There will be even more weight gain as time goes by. We'll monitor you, and I'll let you know if you're gaining too much or too little."

That night, lying in the God-blessed air conditioning of the bedroom, watching "American Idol" on their fancy new color TV, Tracy Sue felt something move inside her.

That can't be the baby kicking already. It ain't even three months yet.

She thought about calling Ray-Ray in from the living room, where he was busy finishing off the last of the Kentucky Fried they'd bought on the way home.

Then she heard him belch as he popped open another can of Busch and turned on the ball game.

Maybe later.

By the time Ray-Ray came to bed, the movement had stopped and she'd forgotten about it. She lay in the darkness, pretending to be asleep as he arranged himself next to her. The September night had even grown cool enough that she'd turned off the A/C and opened the windows.

She fell asleep to the soothing lullaby of bellowing 'gators and chirping, grunting frogs from the nearby swamp.

The sounds of home.

****

"Doc, this ain't right." Tracy Sue complained, as Hannifin prepared to slide the ultrasound wand over her belly. "I'm like some kinda whale. I musta gained fifty pounds already."

"Don't worry, Mrs. Baker. You're right where you should be for your third trimester. Your excessive weight gain is mostly water retention due to the fertility treatments. Once you have the baby, you'll lose the weight so quickly

you won't believe it."

Dr. Hannifin positioned the monitor away from Tracy Sue and pressed the wand against her distended stomach. The speakers emitted the wah-wah sound she recognized from the medical shows on TV.

"Excellent. The baby is just fine."

He made some notes in his charts and then closed the folder. "There's one more thing we need to discuss. Sometime in the next two to four weeks, probably the third week in April, you will be going into labor. When you do, I want you to call me immediately. Do not go to your local hospital, or call 911."

Tracy Sue nodded as she wiped away cold jelly with the paper towels he handed her.

He passed her a business card. "Call this number, day or night. I will dispatch a special ambulance to bring you here, so we can monitor the birth."

Something in Hannifin's tone of voice set off an alarm in Tracy Sue.

He wants to take your baby.

Now why would she think that? But try as she might, now that it was there, she couldn't get the thought out of her head.

No one is going to touch my baby!

"Sure, Doc. We'll call." Tracy Sue forced herself to smile, and shoved the card in the back pocket of her pink terrycloth shorts.

"This is most important, Ms. Baker. The moment you feel the first contractions, call me immediately."

Over my dead body.

The words almost jumped out of her mouth, and she had to clench her teeth to keep quiet.

With a quick nod, Tracy Sue brushed past him and out of the office.

****

"Something's wrong, Doctor." Gail Grady watched through the window as Mr. Baker hurried across the parking lot to catch up with his wife.

"You may be right." Karl Hannifin joined the nurse at the polarized glass. "Mrs. Baker seemed unusually nervous today."

"You don't think the serum was too strong, do you?"

"Highly unlikely. The genetic material and hormones were calculated specifically for their body weights."

"What are you going to do if they don't come in for the birthing?"

"We'll just have to make sure they do. Starting tonight, I'm going to have two men watching them at all times. As soon as she exhibits any sign of going into labor, our team will bring them here."

"What if someone sees?"

Hannifin drew down the blind, cutting off the sight of the Bakers driving off in their decrepit Dodge. "One of the reasons we chose them was for the remoteness of their living arrangements. I'm certain my men can escort them away from a trailer in the swamplands without any fuss."

****

"Damn if I ain't hungry again," Ray-Ray complained. Dressed in his usual after-dinner attire of stained Jockey shorts and matching wife-beater T-shirt, he was staring into the refrigerator. Only a case of Busch beer stared back at him from the otherwise empty shelves.

Spotlighted in the dim glow from of the refrigerator's bulb, his long hair, straggly beard, and hairy chest made Tracy Sue think of cave men digging for food.

Tracy Sue ran her hands down her body, let them linger over the medicine ball of her belly. Under the skin, the baby kicked and punched. It seemed like it was always active now.

One hand drifted lower, pulled at the string of her sweatpants. She was suddenly hot. Sweat coated her body, even with the air conditioning set at sixty-seven.

Hannifin had told her she might experience hot flashes or muscle aches as her due date drew closer. But this was more than hot flashes.

She pulled down her sweat pants, kicked them to the floor. Her blouse, sopping wet under the arms, followed. Naked, she lay back against the rough material of the cushions and let the air conditioning blow across her skin.

A wet, musky odor wafted up to her, and she realized it came from her.

From between her legs.

"Jesus, Tracy Sue. Watch'ya doin?" Ray-Ray stood by the TV, a can of beer

in one hand.

"Somethin' don't feel right. I'm all hot, and the baby's kicking like a 'possum in a garbage can."

"What the hell's that jizz comin' outta ya? Is you supposed to do that?"

Tracy Sue stuck a hand between her legs. Sticky, thick fluids coated her fingers. He held her hand up. In the light of the TV, glistening, slimy strings hung from her fingers.

Another kick, this time so strong she actually saw the skin bulge out for a moment.

"Oh, Jesus. It's time. The baby's comin'."

"Well, call the doctor, then."

"No. I don't want him near it." She thought he'd get mad, but he nodded.

Having it in the trailer didn't seem right either, though. It should be...

Outside.

The swamp.

The sudden need was overwhelming. Tracy Sue heaved her body from the couch and pushed Ray-Ray to the side in her haste to feel mud and water under her feet. She cradled her super-sized belly as she ran through the tall grass and scrub brush that separated the back of their property from Hangman's Swamp.

Warm heat, heavy breathing, and man-odor told her that Ray-Ray had joined her, but she paid him little attention.

She had to reach the swamp before it was too late.

****

Karl Hannifin's cell phone danced and vibrated in his pocket just as he was getting into his Lexus.

"Hannifin."

"Doctor, this is Timmons. Something weird is going on."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the two of them just ran out of the trailer buck naked, and took off into the scrub."

It can't be...

"What's back there?"

"Far as I know, nuthin' but swamp that eventually butts up against Lake

Okeechobee."

"Follow them. I should be there in less than an hour."

No time to get his medical team together. He'd have to handle this himself. Timmons and his partner could help.

Hannifin jammed the key into the ignition, filled the still night air with the sound of grinding metal as he held it in the start position too long.

This can't be happening. The dosage shouldn't have been strong enough to activate any instinctive responses.

Moments later he was doing twice the speed limit as he headed south on 721.

****

"Christ almighty. What the fuck are those two doing?"

Satch Timmons knelt on the damp ground next to Larry "Red" Reynolds. Through the intervening clumps of waist-high grass they had a clear view of Tracy Sue and Ray-Ray Baker, who at the moment were moving back and forth through the muck at the edge of Hangman's Swamp. Coated in black ooze, Tracy Sue looked for all the world like the amateur mud wrestlers at the titty bars.

"Damned if I know," Red whispered. "If they wasn't naked, I'd say they're looking for somethin'. But the girl sounds like she's in pain."

Satch listened to the moans coming from the pregnant woman as she splashed in the muddy shallows, Ray-Ray following behind her.

"Who lets their pregnant wife walk naked in a swamp? That's just...wait, my phone's vibratin'."

Timmons drew his cell phone out and flipped it open. "Timmons." He listened for a moment, then spoke. "From the back of the trailer go straight into the brush. Walk about ten minutes. You'll hear 'em way before you see 'em. Just stay low." He closed the phone.

"Hannifin?" Red asked.

"Yeah. He's at the trailer."

"Good. Sooner he gets here, the better. This whole thing's startin' to creep me out." Red jerked a thumb towards the swamp, where Tracy Sue had gone down on all fours and was digging in the mud about ten feet from shore.

****

Timmons was right, thought Karl Hannifin as he approached the swamp. Even from thirty yards away, the guttural shouts and splashing water were clearly audible. The April air held a definite chill, and the wild scents of sulfur, decaying plant matter, and stagnant water were overlaid with a musky aroma that was all too familiar.

I'm too late. Unless I can bring them back to shore, they'll complete the ritual in the swamp.

Hannifin caught sight of Timmons and Reynolds to his left, but ignored them. There was no need to hide from the Bakers; in fact, it was essential that they see him.

He emerged from the scrub grass at the edge of the swamp. Setting down the two Styrofoam containers he carried, Hannifin called out, "Mr. and Mrs. Baker! Please, listen to me. It's most urgent."

Out in the water, Tracy Sue stopped digging and looked up. Ray-Ray stood behind her, spatters of mud from his wife's activity spotting his body.

Hannifin aimed his flashlight at the couple.

"What's goin' on, Doc?" Timmons and Reynolds had emerged from their hiding place in the grass, both of their flashlights adding to the visibility.

Before Hannifin could answer, Tracy Sue shook a fist at the three men.

"Doc, you stay the hell away from me! You ain't gettin' my baby."

"There is no baby, Mrs. Baker. At least not yet. Please, come out of the water and I'll explain everything."

"You're lyin'! You jus' want my baby."

"No, Mrs. Baker, I just want you to give birth in the clinic, where I can document everything. If you leave your eggs here, I'll never be able to..."

"Eggs? What the hell are you..."

The rest of her sentence was lost in an agonized scream. Tracy Sue doubled over in a fetal position, then rolled over onto her back, the shallow water not even covering her lower body.

Ray-Ray waded forward to help, calling her name. All Tracy Sue could do was moan and shake her head.

"Doctor, we gotta do something." Reynolds started towards the water, his freckles standing out against pale skin like pepper on a napkin.

Hannifin stopped him. “It’s too late. Here, take one of these.” He handed the man one of the coolers. “All we can do is try to get some of the samples back to the lab.”

“Samples?” The man took the container but didn’t move.

“Just go!” Hannifin began forcing his way through the muck towards the moaning woman. “You’ll know when it happens.”

Hannifin was still six feet away from Tracy Sue when she arched her back and spread her legs as far as they would go.

From between the swollen lips of her vagina a stream of grayish, thick mucus streamed out. The long, irregular strands curled into a globular shape at her feet. Round, pearly-white objects, each the size of a marble, hung suspended throughout the mass. As more and more material exited, her stomach grew smaller and smaller.

“Oh, God!” Reynolds dropped his cooler and turned away to vomit.

“No! I need those eggs!” Hannifin increased his pace towards Tracy Sue.

Just as he reached her side, a heavy force knocked him sideways into the water. He cleared his eyes and found Ray-Ray Baker standing between him and Tracy Sue.

“Sorry, Doc, can’t let you no closer.” Ray-Ray held his fists out and ready.

Hannifin scrambled forward and pushed into Ray-Ray’s legs, knocking the other man into the water, then crawled past him. He tried to scoop up the eggs, using the lid to guide the mass forward.

Sudden pain made him drop the container as Ray-Ray grabbed his arm and bent it backwards at the elbow. The wooden sound of breaking bone echoed across the swamp. Hannifin tried to scream, but it turned into a gurgle as Ray-Ray thrust his head under the water.

As his vision faded away, he faintly heard Tracy Sue calling out, “Don’t let them touch my babies!”

****

In the three weeks since giving birth, Tracy Sue had been living on the rotted flesh of Dr. Hannifin and his assistants. Ray-Ray brought her hunks of meat each day so she wouldn’t have to leave the eggs.

Now, beneath their semi-transparent coatings of protective jelly, the embryos

had reached a state of almost constant activity.

It was beginning.

Inside the sticky sac, her babies burst free from their eggs. The thick jelly slowed their escape, and Tracy Sue gently broke the mass apart, opening it up so the young ones could enter the world.

One by one, the miniature forms pushed their way out into the water and swam away, tiny arms and legs pumping furiously as the babies made their way into the safety of the deeper water.

Tracy Sue smiled. The girls all had her blonde hair and skinny bodies; the boys were duplicates of their father, right down to their little beards and mustaches.

In a week, maybe two, they'd grow large enough to join their parents at the trailer.

In the meantime, she was starting to feel very horny.

On the beach, Ray-Ray waited for her, hard and ready.

Homo Suicidus

People always say, ‘When the time is right, you’ll know it.’ It doesn’t matter if they’re referring to falling in love, changing the path of your life, or preparing to die.

Or all of the above.

Fifteen stories below, your prospective paramours begin to notice me. Someone glances up, perhaps just to follow the flight of a bird, perhaps because they’ve caught movement out of the corner of their eye, movement where none should be.

People gasp, point and shout, drawing the attention of others. Then comes the inevitable finger pointing; *Look! Up there! Is he going to jump?*

And with that, the frenzy begins.

The word *jump* is a signal to them, a beacon, and their numbers grow, more and more of them until the sidewalk and road are packed tight with bodies, all staring upwards at one thing.

You.

A door bangs open behind you, the stairway entrance to the roof. You didn’t bother to block it earlier. Why bother? The uniformed men and women approaching you all have their role to play in this phase of the eternal cycle.

“Stay back!” You lift one leg from the edge, your foot dangling in the air. They retreat, as they’ve been trained to, hands hovering impotently over their guns. Down on the street, the crowd releases a hushed ‘Oooh’ in unison.

One of the officers says the first of many platitudes that will be spoken to you today. “Don’t do it. It’s not worth it.” Behind him, another man in blue turns his head and talks quietly into the radio clipped to his shoulder, as if it would make a difference if you heard him.

You can imagine the topic of his conversation: *crazy; jumper; suicide*. But in fact these people know nothing. They all have their opinions, just like the crowd below. *He’s depressed over a woman, or a man. Or both. He’s just lost his job. His parents abused him. He’s on drugs.*

Different thoughts, with one common thread—they believe you have a problem, that you’re trying to end your life. They’re wrong, though. You have no hidden issues. Your time simply arrived, just as you always knew it would. True, this life that you’ve known—and enjoyed—will end, but your death will

also be a new beginning. The next step in the cycle. Like the mayfly, gone in an instant but never really gone, not in the evolutionary sense.

Far below, an amplified voice calls out to you. "Attention! You on the roof. Step away from the edge. I repeat, step away from the edge."

They all have their jobs, and you understand them. The ones on the roof are there to talk to you, plead with you, hoping to convince you back down, give yourself up. Of course, they're only pretending to be concerned about your welfare; their real duty lies in protecting the ever-growing crowd. And you need them to fulfill that duty well. They have to keep the bystanders away, so your body won't strike any of them. That would defeat your purpose.

At the same time, you trust the eager throng to do all they can to press closer, their desire to observe a tragedy overwhelming their sense of safety. The push and pull of the two opposing forces will create a boundary, a zone of constant movement that grows denser as more people enter it.

You know it as the propagation zone.

You look down and gauge your audience. There are still gaps in the ring; people still have enough room to move quickly.

Not time yet.

Heavy-soled shoes crunch on gravel and you turn around to face your would-be saviors. There are more of them now, at least a dozen. One, a bespectacled man with thinning hair and an out-of-date sports coat, steps forward.

"Hello. I'm Doctor Mason. What's your name?"

The obligatory psychologist. Or perhaps he's simply a well-educated social worker. It doesn't matter.

"Dennis," you say. You want him to think he's got a dialog going. He doesn't need to know that it's you who's stalling for time. "Dennis Martin."

Dr. Mason smiles. He believes in his power to help you, to save you. "Nice to meet you, Dennis. Now, how about you come down from the wall and we have a nice chat?"

You assume a thoughtful expression, giving him the impression his words have worked their magic and caused you to reconsider your planned departure.

"All right. But first, tell them," you point past him at the officers, "they have to go back by the door. I don't want anyone grabbing me."

He spreads his hands and gives you a forlorn look. "I don't think I can do that, Dennis. They're only here to help you, just like me."

Maybe a real psychotic would have mistaken it for an honest expression, but

to you his face is nothing but a cheap dime-store mask hiding his real feelings: pity, boredom, and more than a little superiority. You know his type well; confident in his own abilities to the point of believing it could *never* be his fault if someone actually did jump. After all, he *is* an expert in his field. Ten minutes after you launch yourself over the edge, he'll no doubt be heading back to his office, telling himself he did everything a person could do and wondering if he can cancel the rest of his appointments and head to the golf course early.

"Either they go, or I do," you say, raising your leg again.

Mason's smile falters, and he holds up his hands. He might not believe your jumping would be his fault, but he is well aware that others could perceive things differently. "Don't be hasty, Dennis. Let's see if we can work out a compromise."

You hold back a smile as he turns to the officers and asks them to move back several paces. He has no idea your requests, like your willingness to talk, are just as much for show as his negotiations. You both know you'll be doing a swan dive to the street sooner or later; he just doesn't know you're as aware of the futility of this whole charade as he is.

"There." He smiles at me again. "Now, Dennis, why don't you tell me why you're up here."

What is it about therapists that they have to use your name in every sentence? Is it supposed to keep you focused on them? Make you think they're listening to you, or that they really care whether you live or die?

You find it annoying, so you decide to annoy back. You lower yourself off the two-foot high wall but keep your hands on it. You're safe enough; you can easily climb back up before any of the officers can cover half the distance between them and you.

"Well, Doctor Mason, I guess it's because my mother never loved me and someone stole my dog when I was a boy. Or maybe it's because I've just lost the will to live."

Another crack in his professional mask shows you've hit home. He has no idea if you're being sarcastic or faking sarcasm to hide a deeper truth. Since his entire profession is based on the slow but steady peeling back of a patient's emotional layers, he's completely out of his element when dealing with someone who has no emotional issues.

"I understand where you're coming from, Dennis. You're not the first person

I've met who felt like life wasn't worth living. But you know what?" Mason flashes that insincere smile again, the one that's too wide for his face. "I've found that talking about your problems, letting them out into the open, can make you realize they're not as bad as they seem. So, how about you and I have a nice talk? You can always come back up here another time."

You cast a quick glance over your shoulder. Throughout Mason's speech you've heard more vehicles arriving, more amplified shouts to *Move back, people!*

The crowd has definitely grown. Somewhere in the distance, a fire siren howls its urgent cry. That meant they might be bringing in one of those trampoline-like rescue devices, which would be bad news for you. It's almost time. You just need the crowd to be a *little* larger, packed a *little* closer.

Mason steps towards you. "Don't look down there, Dennis. That's not your future."

"Stay back! Let me think!" You put confusion and hysteria into your voice, when all you're really feeling is the thrill of knowing your time is almost at hand. The trick works, though. Mason stops moving.

You peek down again. The space around the police officers has shrunk, the circle packed tight around the vastly outnumbered public servants.

The moment has arrived.

"Well, Doctor Mason, you make a good argument, but I think this session is over."

As the man's mouth drops open in surprise, you boost yourself up and onto the ledge. One of the officers behind Mason swears and yells into his radio. No attempt at secrecy now. "He's jumping!"

Below you, the crowd sees you spread your arms wide like a cliff diver. A chant starts up. *"Jump! Jump! Jump!"*

It's your mating call, urging you on. If only they knew the truth, they'd fall silent or run away.

The police on the roof run towards you. You look over your shoulder at them and give a little wave, and then leap into the air, using all the strength in your legs to force yourself up and outward. The last thing you want to do is hit the building on the way down; that would ruin everything.

Wind blows through your hair and roars in your ears as you sail downward. The whole world is in slow motion. Voices shout. The people below you react just as they're supposed to: some try to back away but the wall of bodies

behind them is nearly solid, the human sardines packed so tight the ones in front can only turn their backs to the coming disaster. At the same time, the ones in the back push forward, trying to get a better view of the impending flesh explosion. The circle closes in around the frantic officers who are running to escape the living missile heading towards them.

The ground is approaching faster now, and you spread your arms and legs further, trying to create as wide a surface area as possible, to produce maximum impact.

You think about mayflies, and propagation, and dandelions.

You think about your children.

A moment of intense pain, and then you are everywhere, touching one life after another, your ending turning into so many beginnings.

Thoughts and feelings overwhelm you as you suddenly see the world through so many eyes at once, experience so many points of view at the same time.

You're a woman with three babies at home, wiping blood from your arm and wishing you hadn't stopped to check out the commotion. But more than that, you wish you didn't have to go home and listen to your babies screaming for another minute.

You're a cop whose wife has been cheating on you. You wonder if maybe the jumper didn't have the right idea after all.

You're an old man who realizes you don't want to slowly fade away like a rotting vegetable; you make the decision that when your time comes, it will be by your own hand.

You're a twenty-year-old recovering drug addict, who gets the sudden urge to return to the old neighborhood and score some really awesome shit.

Hundreds of them feel your touch. Not all of them conceive; reproduction is never perfect. Just ask the frog whose sperm floats past the massed eggs of his mate, or the woman who ovulates every month yet never gets pregnant.

But you've done your best. Your offspring are out there now, more than you'd hoped for, each carrying not only a piece of you, but of all the generations before you. Good, strong stock.

You hope your children will be just as strong.

No Place Like Home

"Mine."

He'd waited so long to say that word.

Barry Minder stood in the entryway to 419 Spring Street and allowed himself a smile. The living room and kitchen spread out before him, complete with dusty hardwood floor, faded green 1950's wallpaper, and yellow Formica countertops.

"All mine," Barry whispered.

A cool breeze swept past, ruffling his oily black hair and sending a quick chill down his neck. Barry turned to see if he'd left the door open, but it was securely closed.

It was a greeting. The sudden, odd thought was followed by another: *The house is just as happy as I am.*

He'd had the feeling he and the house belonged together ever since the day he'd seen the 'For Sale' sign in the yard. He'd felt compelled to call the real estate agent, even though he knew he probably didn't have enough money in the bank to buy a house. Hell, after fifteen years as a security guard, he could barely pay the rent on his cramped apartment.

The small cape was in excellent condition, and it only took Barry one look to know he'd never be able to afford it. Halfway through the walk-through, he'd thanked the real estate agent and said he had to go, not wanting to embarrass himself when the topic of money came up.

The agent had presented Barry with his card and a listing sheet. "Call me if you change your mind. At this price, it won't be on the market for long."

Barry started to walk away, but then stopped when he saw the price on the listing.

"This can't be right." He couldn't believe it. The asking price was half of what he'd expected.

The agent smiled. "Sure is, my friend. You won't find a better price for a house like this."

Sensing blood, the real estate agent moved in for the kill. He tapped the listing and began extolling the virtues of the house. "It comes as is, fully furnished. The—"

"Wait," Barry interrupted. "Why is it so cheap?"

The agent stopped in mid-spiel, the predatory smile draining away from his face. He sighed and shook his head.

"That's what everyone asks, right before they leave. Here's the deal. The previous owners died in the house, right here in the kitchen. An older couple, retired."

"What happened?"

"Damndest thing. It was a bee sting. The police think the husband got stung, and when the wife tried to help him, she fell down the stairs. He was allergic, but he managed to dial 911 before his heart stopped. The paramedics found him on the kitchen floor. She was at the bottom of the stairs with a broken neck. A shame, too; they were getting ready to move down south."

"But why would that make the price so low?"

The agent raised one eyebrow. "Mister, most people don't want to live in a house where someone died. Even their own son wouldn't move in. He lives out in California. He tried to rent it, but once the market picked up again, he decided to sell it instead."

"I'll take it," Barry heard himself say. The down payment would wipe out his entire savings and the mortgage would mean living paycheck to paycheck for years, but it didn't matter.

He had to have it.

Two weeks later he picked up the keys to his new house.

****

A week after he finished unpacking, Barry sat at a kitchen table filled with bills and cursed his dead-end job. He'd known buying the house would be a struggle financially, but he hadn't figured how bad. According to his calculations, he was in for a lot of macaroni and cheese dinners. And definitely no cable TV. But he didn't care. Even though the furniture was old and the décor out of date, he'd felt completely at home since the day he moved in.

"You are *at home, Barry."*

Barry glanced around the room. For a moment it had seemed as if someone else had spoken those words.

"It's true. This *is* my home now." he told himself with a smile. "So why not enjoy it?"

He put his bills back in their shoebox and grabbed a beer from the refrigerator, the incident already forgotten.

Barry's run of good luck began the following Monday, when Trent Dilman, the Director of Hopewell Security, called him before the morning shift and asked him to stop by the office during his lunch hour. For the entire morning, Barry experienced nervous twitches in his stomach, wondering what he might have done wrong.

When he arrived at the office, the reason for the meeting caught him completely by surprise.

"Barry, you've been here a long time, and your record is spotless. We've had a supervisor's position come open suddenly. Think you're ready?"

"Er, um..." Barry's tongue felt frozen in his mouth. He almost said no, and then a sudden image appeared in his mind, him standing in his new house, his supervisor's jacket in hand, dropping a hefty paycheck on the kitchen table. A paycheck big enough to cover the bills and still leave something left for a new TV.

"Tell him yes." The voice in his head sounded assertive, secure. So unlike his own.

"Yes." This time the word came from his mouth. "Yes, I'm ready."

A strange feeling filled him; not excitement, not nervousness, but...self-confidence. Something he'd never felt before. For the rest of the day he reveled in it, walking his beat at the high school a little straighter, speaking with more authority when he rousted the ever-present loitering teenagers from behind the building.

That night, a new smell greeted Barry when he entered the house. A faint aroma in the air; something warm and friendly. It was even stronger in the kitchen, and it brought a wave of nostalgia with it that made no sense.

Probably just lingering odors from all the meals the Hemfords cooked here over the years.

Barry thought about how nice it would be to come home to a wife who had a meal waiting for him.

"Every man needs a home-cooked meal, especially after an important day."

Now where had that thought come from? At the age of thirty-five, he couldn't

even remember the last time he'd had a real home-cooked meal. He could fry a hamburger and make frozen pizza, but that was all. And his mother hadn't been much better. Growing up, he'd always been envious of the nice dinners his friends' mothers had made.

Tonight, though, he felt a need for something more substantial than a boxed, frozen meal. He decided to splurge and go to a nearby diner. *What the hell. I'll be getting a raise with my new position.*

"Meatloaf, mashed potatoes, vegetables, and gravy. That's how you celebrate a promotion."

Another non sequitur. He hadn't had meatloaf in years. But it seemed right.

He grabbed his keys and headed out.

The Monday Special at the Crossroads Diner just happened to be meatloaf. Barry was contemplating that coincidence when the waitress came over to take his order. One look at her and he completely forgot what the menu in his hand.

Sunshine-blonde hair, sparkling blue eyes, and a smile that seemed to brighten the very air around her, she was quite possibly the most beautiful person he'd ever seen.

"Hi, there," the angel in the brown uniform said. "What can I get you?"

For the second time in one day, Barry found himself responding in a manner completely at odds with his usual demeanor. Snapping the menu closed, he flashed her a quick wink and said, "I'll have the meatloaf special, a Coke, and your phone number."

While the new, confident Barry spoke, the old Barry cowered inside, ready to melt from embarrassment.

I'll be lucky if she doesn't have the manager kick me out.

But she didn't. Instead, she just wrote down his order and left without a word.

Great. She probably thinks I'm some kind of pervert.

When she returned with his meal, she said "Here you go," and walked away before he could apologize. He ate his meal feeling like an utter dope. Afterwards, she didn't even ask him if he wanted dessert, just dropped the check and moved on to the next table.

Barry took out his wallet, thinking he could never return to the diner again. Only when he flipped the bill over, he discovered a Post-it note stuck to the front.

Sunny Doyle
555-4474
You'd better call!

Barry paid and hurried home, clutching the thin paper in his hand. He called her the next night, his hand shaking so bad he misdialed her number twice.

Six months later, Sunny moved into the house on Spring Street.

****

Barry opened the door, hung his jacket on the duck-shaped key rack in the entryway, and went into the kitchen to see if Sunny needed any help with dinner.

"Hi, babe, how was your day?" he asked, planting a kiss on her cheek. In the five years they'd been married, she hadn't changed a bit. Maybe she no longer had her girlish figure, but Barry didn't care. As far as he was concerned, wife and life were both perfect.

His latest promotion had him managing security for three sites, including the new Centerville Mall, and it came with a third week of vacation and a pay bump to a cool hundred and ninety thou a year. Sunny had quit her job at the diner not long after they married, as they hadn't needed her salary. Two vacations a year, a timeshare in the Bahamas, two new cars in the driveway. Could life be any better?

At work that morning, he'd realized it was the fifth anniversary of the day he'd moved into the house. He'd brought home a nice bottle of wine, and he'd called Sunny earlier and told her to make meatloaf and mashed potatoes.

After all, that's how you celebrate an important day.

Sunny turned away from the stove. "Barry, we need to talk."

Something in her tone caught his attention, and he paused in setting the table. "What's wrong?"

"I've been thinking," she began, her voice soft at first but then growing stronger. "We've been in this house for awhile now. I think it's time we moved."

"What?" Barry asked, not sure he'd heard her correctly. "What?"

"Sweetheart, listen. We can do better than this." Sunny pointed at the kitchen walls. "Look around. You've never let me change the wallpaper, the cabinets,

anything. Even the drapes are still the same."

She gave him a little half-smile. "It's like we're living in the fifties. I understand this was your first house, but I think it's time we got something that's *ours."*

Barry shook his head. "Why should we move? It's not like we need more space. There's only the two of us. And I like the way the house is decorated. It's...homey. And a bigger house...think of the mortgage. The taxes. And for what?"

Barry started to say more, but at that moment the dishwasher door fell open with a loud bang, making both of them jump.

"Barry, I'm tired of this place. Besides, with the money you're making now, we can afford a bigger mortgage."

Barry stared at Sunny, who'd suddenly become a stranger. She started to say something else, but the sudden beeping of the smoke alarm interrupted her.

"Damn, the meatloaf is burning!" Sunny waved at the smoke pouring from the oven. "It wasn't supposed to be ready for another fifteen minutes." She pulled the ruined dinner out and started opening windows.

Barry went into the living room and sat down, trying to come to grips with the idea of moving.

When the lamp on the end table flickered and went out, he sat in the dark while Sunny cleaned the kitchen and called for takeout.

****

"Isn't it beautiful?" Sunny asked, her voice full of excitement.

Barry didn't respond. The past four weeks had been a whirlwind for him. Sunny had found their new house after only three days of looking. The next day, a couple had put in an offer on their old house. Barry had signed the papers and then stepped aside. She'd taken care of all the packing, moving, and decorating. She'd insisted they move into the new place right away, even though they still had two weeks to vacate the old house.

And he needed those two weeks, because he had a long list of repairs to make, a list that seemed to grow longer with each passing day.

Ever since they'd accepted the offer – contingent on the repairs being made – the house on Spring Street had seemed determined to make things difficult.

For every problem he fixed, two more turned up. Leaky drains, a broken basement stair, a new igniter for the heater. For five years, he'd never had to do any repairs or maintenance in the house, and now it seemed like he needed a plumber or carpenter every other day. Sunny said it was a sign they'd made the right choice by moving, that age was finally catching up to the old place.

But Barry felt guilty, as if he was abandoning a friend in a time of need.

On top of everything else, he'd been experiencing a string of bad luck lately. Thieves had broken into a store right under the noses of his team, he'd gotten a flat tire on the way to work last week, and yesterday morning he'd spilled coffee on his pants ten minutes before an important meeting.

Barry's text alert went off, interrupting his train of thought.

"We need you in the office ASAP."

A surge of excitement filled him. Maybe his luck was about to turn around. He'd submitted a proposal earlier in the week, detailing how they needed additional men at some of the sites in high-crime neighborhoods. The initial expense would be high, but in the long run it would pay off, because fewer incidents meant greater customer satisfaction.

"Sunny, it's Mr. Brimmer. I've got to go into work. Can you handle things here for a while?"

"Sure, go ahead," she waved a hand at him. "When you come home, I'll have everything finished."

"Great," Barry mumbled under his breath.

At the front door, his hand automatically went to the key holder but found only empty space. One of the many things he hadn't been allowed to bring, because it "interfered with the lines of the foyer."

He dug through his pockets until he located his keys, and then escaped to the car.

****

"Barry, thanks for coming in." Wilson Brimmer sat behind Barry's desk. Standing next to him was a man Barry didn't recognize. Brimmer introduced him as Kyle Lowenthal, VP of Human Resources.

"Is this about my proposal?" Barry asked, taking a seat in the wooden chair usually occupied by visitors.

"I'm afraid not," Brimmer said. "We just found out we've lost two major accounts. In order to keep profits steady, we have to trim personnel costs forty percent. We're doing that by eliminating several supervisory positions. Unfortunately, yours is one of them."

Barry stared at Brimmer. "You mean...I'm fired?"

Lowenthal spoke for the first time. "We don't want to do that, Barry. You've been a valuable employee. Rather than let you go, we'd like to offer you a different position. Instead of Supervisor, your title would be Senior Guard. Of course, you'll have to take a pay cut. But there's always the chance you could be reinstated to your old position when business picks up again."

"But I just bought a new house." Barry hated the whining tone in his voice, hated the tears threatening to burst free.

"You need to give me your decision by tomorrow morning," Lowenthal said.

"I can't pay my mortgage on a guard's salary. Isn't there something else you can do?"

Brimmer and Lowenthal stared at him, their silence all the answer he needed. Realizing complaining would do no good, Barry got up and left the office.

Red-tinged thoughts of going bankrupt, selling their new house, working as a security guard the rest of his life, all churned in his head as he drove home.

It wasn't until he pulled into the driveway that he realized he'd unconsciously driven to the house on Spring Street.

Warm tears running down his cheeks, Barry contemplated the dark windows. *It looks so wrong, so...alone. A house shouldn't look that way.*

He thought about the way he'd felt each time he came home after a hard day's work, like he finally belonged somewhere, like someone loved him. He'd had that feeling every day he lived there. But now it was gone, just like his job.

"Barry, you can get that feeling back. You belong here. This *is your home."*

"You mean, it *was*," Barry said to the voice.

"You can be happy again, Barry. Everything you want, everything you need, is here."

A hopeful smile touched Barry's lips. "Really?"

"Of course."

Barry's smile grew wider as the voice told him how to make everything

better.

When it was finished, the voice asked, *"You know what you have to do?"*

Yes. Yes, he did.

Feeling like a heavy weight had fallen from his shoulders, Barry started the car.

****

Barry found Sunny sorting through boxes in the spacious living room.

"Sunny, I've got an idea. Why don't you take a break, and we'll go get something to eat. We can finish unpacking tomorrow."

"That's sounds great. Where do you want to go?"

"How about the Crossroads Diner? We haven't eaten there in awhile."

"The diner? That's all the way across town. Can't we go someplace closer?" She gave him her pouty face, which she'd perfected over the years.

Barry shook his head, enjoying the determination rising inside him. He knew by *closer* she actually meant *nicer*.

"Actually, we have to stop at the old house before we eat. I need to change one more faucet. I'll grab my tools and meet you at the car."

He turned and walked out, purposely giving Sunny no chance to object.

Tools. Yes, I'll definitely need some tools.

****

Sunny watched as Barry placed his toolbox and a large plastic tarp on the floor of the old kitchen.

"What's that for?" she asked. "You told me this wasn't going to take long."

Now the pouty face had been joined by its best friend, the whiny voice.

"Sunny, I've decided to stay here. I'm not moving." Barry felt the thrill of confidence, the self-assurance he'd been lacking when he'd walked away from Brimmer and Lowenthal like a scared puppy.

"What?"

"I never had any luck before I bought this house, and my life has gone to shit since we moved out. I don't want to go back to being the old Barry Minder, with the dead-end job and no life."

"Barry, what the hell are you talking about? We just bought a beautiful house, we have a wonderful life."

"I lost my job today. They busted me back to security guard. That means we can't afford our beautiful new house, even if you go back to work."

Barry reached out, clasped her hands in his. "But if we stay here, it will all be different. My luck will turn around again, and everything will be like it was."

"Barry, you're talking crazy. Moving to a new house has nothing to do with you losing your job. You'll just get another one."

"You don't understand!" It was so obvious. Why couldn't she see?

"She doesn't care, Barry. They never do. Just like my *wife. They always want something bigger, something better, until they use a man up. Time to do something about it. Like I did."*

Barry drove a fist into Sunny's stomach, doubling her over. His next punch broke her nose; his third dislocated her jaw and loosened two teeth.

After that, he lost count of how many times he hit her.

Barry realized Sunny was dead only after his arm grew too tired to swing anymore. He had an instant of panic when he looked down at her bruised, misshapen face and imagined the jail cell he'd be spending the rest of his life in, but then the solution was delivered to him.

"Barry, nothing bad can happen to you as long as you live here. Now, hide the body and clean the floor. And then there will be one more thing to do before you can stay here forever."

"One more thing?" Barry asked as he wrapped Sunny's body in the tarp. "Why? With Sunny gone, I don't have to leave."

"But Barry, the house isn't yours anymore, remember? Soon the new owners will come, and they'll make *you leave. Unless..."*

"Unless? Unless what?" He pushed an uncooperative arm back between two folds of plastic and finished rolling up the corpse.

"First things first. Clean the floor and hide the body downstairs."

Barry tied the tarp with twine and used paper towels to wipe up the spots of blood from the floor. Then he dragged the corpse down into the basement and wedged it into a corner.

"Now what do I do?"

A nearby closet door swung open. Inside was an assortment of implements: a shovel, a pick, a large pry bar, and two brooms.

"I never had the chance to enjoy what I accomplished, Barry. You can."

Yes, yes he could.

He pulled out the pry bar. Almost three feet long, it easily weighed ten pounds, if not more.

Smiling, he carried the bar upstairs.

****

The sound of slamming doors in the driveway woke Barry from a restless sleep. He peeked out the window, saw the real estate agent leading the new owners, a young couple buying their first home, towards the front steps. Probably stopping by to see how the repairs are going.

"Hello, is anybody here?" the agent called out as he opened the door.

Just me, here to take back what's mine! Barry pressed a hand against his mouth to stifle his laughter.

"Somebody must be here." A woman's voice. "The lights are on."

"The place is still a mess," said the husband. "I thought you said it would be spotless when we move in."

"The previous owner still has two weeks left to complete the repairs," the agent responded. "I'll let him know you're just here to take some measurements and we'll stay out of his way."

Barry waited in the hallway for the intruders—*"that's right, that's* just *what they are!"* As they went past him, he stepped out and swung the pry bar with all the strength he could muster.

The inch-thick steel rod struck the real estate agent in the side of his face, crumpling bone and sending a spray of red across the wall. As the agent fell, Barry turned to the young man and slammed the bar across the base of his neck. The man collapsed with a grunt, landing next to the unconscious real estate agent.

The woman stepped back, her mouth open wide, and Barry brought the pry bar upwards, catching her under the chin.

Bone shattered as the pole crushed her lower jaw and drove the fragments into the roof of her mouth. Teeth skittered across the floor like dice.

The woman flew backwards into a wall and then slid to the floor, streams of blood spilling from her mangled mouth.

Barry turned his attention back to the husband, who lay on his stomach, making tiny *'uh...uh'* noises.

"They have to disappear, Barry, no traces can be found."

Barry buried the chisel end of the bar into the man's head. The sharp wedge punched through the skull and brain and out the other side, denting the faded linoleum. The body gave one spastic twitch and then went still.

As Barry struggled to pull the bar free, the woman tried to scream but choked on her own blood. All that emerged was a wet, phlegmy noise, part shout and part gargle.

Barry turned around, the pry bar held out in sword-like fashion. Pieces of flesh, bone, and brain matter dangled from the end. The woman's eyes grew wide and she held her hands up, her inarticulate words rising in pitch.

Barry raised the metal pole in the air, as if he were about to plant a post in the ground. His downward thrust forced the tip through her chest, out her back, and into the floor. Blood exploded from her mouth, spraying him with sticky globs.

He held onto the weapon while her body convulsed and shuddered, only removing it when her eyes closed and her head fell to the side.

"Excellent! Everything will be fine now, you'll see. You're home again. No one can make you leave. And if anyone tries..."

Barry smiled at the unseen voice. *Yes, if anyone tries, I'll show them.*

No one will ever push Barry Minder around again.

December Soul

"They talk to me."

Marnie's words came to from across the tiny living room of our apartment. I rolled my eyes, glad her back was to me so she couldn't see. I knew who she meant, just like I knew where the voices really came from. Her head.

The world's a different place since they showed up, but Marnie hadn't changed.

"They tell me dreams. Wondrous dreams. They know my name."

She was at the window, a fragile silhouette against the weak yellow of a December afternoon sky. Looking down at them.

The Lazari.

"Marnie, come with us. Be one with us." Her voice little more than a whisper. Speaking to herself, not me. She took a hit off her joint and shadow-smoke coiled around her. A sudden impulse hit me and I grabbed my phone. I needed to capture the moment. I rarely take pictures, I have no eye for detail. This time, though, when I tapped the review button, I saw that I'd framed her perfectly. A portrait of ethereal beauty, perched on the windowsill, one leg bent, the other hanging down, her baggy T-shirt transformed into a silken camisole, the outline of her uncombed hair creating the illusion of perfectly-styled curls. The shape of her hand up in the air, the joint magically changed into a fancy cigarette poised between two fingers. Even the smoke curling up added a timeless air to the photo.

In that instant, nothing but her splendor existed in the world, and I felt a rush of pure love mixed with a kind of bittersweet joy because deep down I knew it couldn't last. Nothing does. Not love, not peace, not happiness.

And not life, despite what the religious kooks were saying.

Then I noticed the time. I had to leave soon for the hospital. My momentary bliss faded away, leaving just ordinary us and the fucked-up world we existed in.

"It's perfect there," she continued, oblivious to my movements as I went through my usual pre-work routine. Putting on my shoes, finding my wallet, grabbing a handful of oxys from the medicine cabinet. "No anger. No sadness. No hatred."

"That's great," I said, slipping into my coat. Upstairs, the thumping beat of

salsa music cut off in mid-song. I hadn't even noticed the noise until it stopped. Manny Ocheo played his stereo all the time. No one ever complained. Our building is always noisy, the thin walls poor barriers to televisions, radios, or the sounds of families shouting or laughing. Most of the time it barely registered on me, I'd gotten so used to it.

Marnie simply didn't care.

I crossed the room and kissed her. She returned it in a distracted way, her attention more on the five people across the street. The ones looking up in our direction. Although they could have been gazing at any window in our building, it did seem like they had focused on us. Or perhaps just Marnie. Thinking about their gray, dead eyes staring at me sent a chill up my back. I knew they couldn't hurt us; all the Lazari did was walk and stare.

They were still damn creepy.

"You could hear them, too, if you tried."

I held back a snarky comment. Hearing is a sensitive subject with me. Unlike the mellow phantom conversations Marnie enjoys, the incessant buzzing and whining in my head is a living hell. Permanent damage, thanks to years of abusing pain killers. Someday it will go completely. I'd already started watching TV with the volume up, like my grandparents used to. In the not too distant future I'd likely need hearing aids.

But it was better than the alternative.

The crippling headaches afflicting me since childhood would have driven me to suicide by now without my medications—prescribed and illegal. Atypical migraines was the official diagnosis. I didn't experience any of the usual precursor symptoms. No auras. No tingling scalp, phantom smells, or loss of peripheral vision. Just sudden, blinding pain accompanied by blurred vision and nausea. Sometimes for an hour or two, more often for several. As a toddler, unable to handle or comprehend the sheer agony of them, I'd scream and cry and vomit. My parents finally took me to a specialist when I began smashing my head against things. Over the next several years they tried every doctor and medicine they could. Even had me scanned for tumors or aneurysms. The meds would work for a while – reducing the number of attacks per year, lessening the symptoms or duration—and then a new cycle would start, as if my body kept building up immunities to the prescriptions.

Finally, in my teens, I discovered the secret: drugs.

I took everything I could get my hands on. Pot, pain killers, downers. Even

cough medicine and booze. Anything that depressed the nervous system and kept me semi-comatose. In combination with what the doctors gave me, I spent my high school years in a zombie state.

By then I was hooked. Bad. When the stuff in my parents' cabinets didn't do the trick, I turned to schoolyard shit. Pot didn't do anything, but lace it with opium and I'd be good for an entire day. Then came Vicodin. And finally heroin.

My first OD happened at age seventeen. I ended up in the hospital twice more by nineteen. I didn't want to die, but I was willing to do anything to end the pain, even flirt with mortality. The next few years I spent in and out of rehab. In the process, I lost everything. My family gave up on me, my grades ensured I'd never go to a good college, and I had no friends. I'd probably have died before twenty-five if I'd stayed on that path.

Then I met Marnie.

I can't say she turned my life around—she had her own addiction issues at the time—but we fell in love and wanting to be with her gave me a reason to get a handle on my problems. I ditched the heroin and controlled my use of the other stuff, took just enough to function without going overboard. I wasn't clean and sober by any means, but I was a functioning member of society again. Like an alcoholic who needs a shot in the morning to get to work and another at lunch, and a couple in the evening. Not drunk, but always with a little something in the system to keep the withdrawal demons at bay.

A perfect solution? Hell, no. But better than ending up in a coffin.

So I suffered the side effects—the tinnitus, the bouts of constipation, the nascent ulcer, never mind what was probably happening in my liver—in order to keep living a semblance of a normal life. A vicious circle: I needed the pain killers to keep the headaches at bay, but they caused the increasingly debilitating noises in my ears, which in turn created depression and stress, which triggered the migraines, which meant taking more pain pills. At this point I couldn't stop if I wanted; I'd tried it once. Managed to make it two days before the hell of detox got too bad.

I hadn't known real silence in years, probably never would again. And it shamed me to admit that Marnie's imaginary conversations sometimes pissed me off. She had the opportunity to experience total quiet whenever she wanted, yet she chose to fill it with ghostly voices, while I would kill to get rid of the never-ending static and bugs even just for a few hours.

When you got right down to it, neither of us had any control over our situations.

"I'll see you in the morning." I added another kiss on the top of her head. Her hair smelled of pot, sweat, and hints of the sandalwood candles she burned constantly in the bedroom. Essence de Marnie. If I'd had more time, I'd have led her back to the bedroom.

Instead, I took two of the oxys, washed them down with the last dregs from a can of soda on the coffee table. Ever since the Lazari appeared, I'd been experiencing an upswing in the frequency of my migraines. Stress is a major trigger, and between the anxiety of losing Marnie's paycheck and living in a world where the dead walked the streets, I had more than my share.

"Always together," she said.

"Always and forever," I repeated. Our private joke. We'd been saying it since we got out of the rehab we'd met in. Two people alone in the world, with only each other to rely on.

Marnie waited until I was almost at the door before speaking again.

"We should go."

I paused. As so often happened with Marnie, her comment could be taken two ways. Leave Brooklyn, escape to somewhere out in the country where the Lazari couldn't find us? Or take our lives and become part of the undead? You could never be sure which way her cryptic thoughts were running.

The sound of gunfire down on the street made me jump. Marnie twitched and dropped her joint. A half-dozen quick, snappy reports. Probably a pistol. Police or private citizens, no way to tell. But either way, I wouldn't need to worry about the Lazari when I left the building.

Despite the government's constant reminders that the zombies posed no threat, police in most cities had created retermination squads that went around putting down any Lazari that got reported. Only they couldn't keep up; the numbers of the walking dead kept rising. So more and more people had taken the matter into their own hands, despite it being illegal.

Three months after the first reports of the dead coming back to life, things were really starting to fray at the edges.

You saw it everywhere you turned. The news, the conversations in the bodegas and at work. The faces of the people passing you on the sidewalk. Haunted, angry, frightened, confused. Eyes darting around, assessing the other pedestrians. It used to be normal for strangers to ignore you, walk past you.

The city's a busy, non-stop place. Now it wasn't uncommon to get a nod as someone approached. Or a nervous wave.

A not-so-subtle request for confirmation of life.

People were afraid, and this time it wasn't of being attacked or bitten. If the most recent rumors were true—and so far, they'd been right each time—mankind was done for. Leaving the city would just delay the inevitable.

Of course, the government was denying it. *"The Lazarus disease is not spread by proximity. They cannot kill you by touching you. Or breathing on you. They cannot kill you with their thoughts."*

I believed that last one. Every test done on captured Lazari showed zero brain function. But the other possibilities? Truth was, no one knew how why the numbers of Lazari were increasing every week. The original theory had been a virus or bacteria. Then something called prions, like Mad Cow disease. Now the CDC kept talking about an unknown fungus, like the one that infected ants and made them do all sorts of crazy shit.

These days, no one trusted the government anymore. Every step of the way they'd been weeks behind what the general population already seemed to know. You could chalk it up to how slowly the wheels of government move, or cover ups, or just head-in-the-sand denial, but lately rumors were more trusted than official reports. Especially after the vice president died during a visit to China and then returned to life three days later—on Air Force One—at the same time the President was on TV assuring the world the whole Lazari epidemic was being overblown by the media.

"They're gone." Sadness filled Marnie's voice. She let out a long sigh and lit another joint.

I didn't say anything. I'd long ago gotten used to her being more connected to the phantoms in her head than to real people. She believed getting stoned kept her grounded, helped her hear the voices that have whispered to her since she was a child. Like an herbal radio tuner for her brain. More importantly, the pot prevented her panic attacks and night terrors, allowing her to sleep and function in a somewhat normal manner.

Which reminded me. I had to leave. Zombie apocalypse or not, the hospital wasn't about to close. And with Marnie out of work—again—we couldn't afford for me to miss any time.

"They'll be back," I said. And they would. Marnie's voices always returned. Her only friends, other than me. She needed them, got seriously depressed

when they weren't whispering to her.

"Yes." Marnie took another hit. "They will. But we should still go."

"We'll talk about it in the morning." Procrastination. One of my many bad habits, according to my mother. She's not wrong. An uptight, cold-hearted, type-A know-it-all who couldn't stick by her son when shit got bad and his addictions got out of control, but not wrong.

Marnie shrugged and gave a half-hearted wave. She was staring out the window again. At the dead-again Lazari? Or waiting for new ones to take their place? It didn't matter, she was off in Marnie-land again. Fine with me. We'd eventually get around to making a decision about leaving. Not today. Maybe not this week. In our own time. Something Mother wouldn't have allowed. Everything had to be according to her schedule. "Do it now or get the fuck out of the way and let me do it" was her motto. That and "You chose that path, Jeremy. Now you have suffer for your actions."

Hey, Mother. How's the apocalypse treating you? I wondered as I turned my back on "Marnie, a study in melancholy." We hadn't spoken in almost three years, way before the Lazari appeared. She'd been convinced I was going to die and go to hell because of my drug use.

"You're committing suicide with those. That's sin."

"Jesus committed suicide," I shot back, turning her religion against her. Anger and the early stages of withdrawal had me eager to lash out. "He knew what would happen when the soldier came for him."

"Don't confuse sacrifice with suicide."

The day I'd gotten out of what would turn out to be my last stint in rehab, she'd told me I wasn't welcome in her house anymore and all my stuff had been placed in storage. I had one month to get it or it would be sold.

A month later I moved in with Marnie and we'd been our own little island ever since. Going on three years. The best ones of my life, despite living paycheck to paycheck and being hooked on a drug that was slowly killing me.

I pictured Mother in church crying and wailing while the pastor sermonized about the second coming or Armageddon. A devout Christian, something like the dead rising would throw a real monkey wrench into Bethany Franklin's perfectly designed life plans. Maybe even more so than having a son addicted to heroin because of chronic pain. Except she wouldn't be able to pretend the Lazari didn't exist. Not when all of humanity was in an uproar over it.

Once the news leaked that the blank-faced, silent people wandering the

streets weren't just high on some new drug or victims of a disease, religious organizations around the world had experienced a major upheaval. Hordes of people abandoned their faiths while just as many others suddenly became fervent believers. Televangelists enjoyed a resurgence and now they dominated the airwaves.

Would she stick around and deal with the crazy or escape the city the same way she used to escape me? Instead of shopping with her friends, just get into the car and head out to some remote vacation spot, ride the shit storm out in seclusion. She had the money to do it. Even after the big market crash that followed the first announcements, there'd be plenty of cash in the bank.

And it wasn't like the world had come to an end. At least not yet. Businesses still ran, people went to work and out to dinner, movies got made, television got watched.

I closed the door behind me, cutting off the sounds of Marnie chatting with her spirit friends. *"No more music. Now it's time—"*

The hallway was oddly silent as I headed for the stairs but then I remembered the gunfire. Everyone had probably stopped what they were doing and run to the windows. When I hit the street, the familiar sounds of the city enveloped me. Horns honking, the growl of a diesel engine as a bus roared by, the background thrum of traffic. The crisp air with its hints of the coming holiday season. The smoky tang of roasting chestnuts, the savory greasy scents of grilled meats and boiled hotdogs emanating from street carts.

The sheer normalcy of it calmed me after the stories in the news. The world wasn't rolling down hill toward Armageddon; this was simply a bump in the road of humanity, like cancer or AIDS or avian flu. Disastrous at first, but eventually science would get it under control.

Bang! Another shot, someplace near the park. The opposite direction I needed to go. I pictured a Lazari toppling over. One thing the movies got right. There's no coming back from a bullet to the head, zombie or not.

I kept an eye out as I walked. Not for Lazari. For shooters. I didn't feel like catching a stray bullet from some drunken asshole. Marnie and I had talked about getting a gun back when the recent dead had started returning. Everyone wanted one for protection. But then things calmed down and we decided we didn't need one. It helped that the Lazari weren't rotting, shambling, brain-eating zombies like on TV. For some reason, the only people who reanimated were those dead two weeks or less, with their brains intact and not embalmed.

The first wave had been mostly those who tended to die alone. Drug addicts, random heart attacks, the elderly, bed-ridden patients with terminal illnesses. They'd pass away and three days later be walking down the street again. It took a while for anyone to even realize it, because if no one knew you died, no one knew you came back.

When proof of reanimation became public knowledge, the world went kind of crazy for a few weeks. But once people realized the Lazari didn't eat brains or flesh—in fact, they didn't seem to eat anything—the terror subsided, became more of a general unease that quickly turned into complacent aggravation. The Lazari became a new kind of homeless problem. An annoyance, an eyesore, but not a real threat. In fact, a lot of people preferred them to the homeless, because even though they spent most of their time wandering the streets or standing in front of buildings, they didn't beg or piss on the sidewalks.

It was some televangelist who first called them Lazari, and referred to the condition as the Lazarus effect. The name stuck, more so than the other terms people used. Dead-heads, zombies, walking dead. It had exactly the effect the government wanted, though, which gave rise to the idea that TV preacher had been a White House shill. Once the reanimated had an innocuous name, it made a frightening situation more palatable, calming what could have been a full-scale, nation-wide riot.

Of course, it wasn't a complete return to normality. You couldn't escape fat, sweaty men on TV sermonizing about the end of the world or open a newspaper without seeing letters to the editor describing the terrible things the Lazari were doing. Chasing people into traffic, stalking them in alleys, causing car accidents. Grieving families and money-hungry revivalist preachers blamed every death from natural causes on the Lazari. Stories about government conspiracies, men in black, aliens, and the wrath of the gods filled the airwaves.

Not long after Halloween, the first retermination units popped up. The vigilantes joined in almost immediately. People started talking about the Lazari having super-powers. Mind control. Distance killing.

"What are they, the dead who stare at goats or something?" I'd said during a lunch break conversation about the Lazari one day. No one got the joke. But several of them said they'd bought guns. Around the same time, I began being more careful during my walks to and from the bus stop.

A pack of four Lazari approaching me broke my reverie. Even from a

distance I could tell what they were. The slow, steady walk, all of them stepping in perfect rhythm. The emotionless, staring faces. I crossed the street well before they reached me, more concerned about contagion than violence. They stopped and looked in my direction.

As much as I didn't believe they could communicate telepathically, it was hard not to get creeped out when they moved in unison like that. For a moment I thought they might chase me but they continued on their way. I'd never been chased by any, but I'd seen it on the news, heard people talking about it happening to them. If you believed the lunatic fringe, they did it to give people heart attacks or make them run into traffic. Undead recruitment tactics.

It made as much sense as any of the theories coming from the CDC, like vestigial memories, primitive hunting tactics encoded in the genes.

I got to the corner just as my bus arrived. It was only half-full, typical of a Sunday. I kept hearing about all the people supposedly leaving the city, but the sidewalks seemed just as crowded as ever. The ER certainly was when I got there. The usual controlled bedlam. Ambulance crews wheeled patients in. Overworked nurses darted from one exam cube to another. Messages blared constantly from the loudspeaker. In the packed waiting room, a man in a blood-stained coat shouted at Leeza Benson, the receptionist on duty.

"Don't let my boy die! I don't want him to end up like those things!" He gestured at the windows. I didn't have to look. I'd seen them on the way in. More than a dozen Lazari standing in the lawn, staring at the gray walls of Brooklyn General. At some point security would chase them away—or the cops would shoot them—but in the meantime they had to be freaking out a lot of people. By tomorrow every death in the hospital would be blamed on supernatural brain rays.

I hurried to the locker room to change into my scrubs. On the shelf of my locker was an unlabeled prescription bottle containing one hundred twenty pills. My monthly oxy delivery, courtesy of Anatoly in Pharmacy. How he managed it, I couldn't even begin to guess. But he had a great business going with me and a few others. Anything you wanted.

Or in my case, desperately needed.

I tucked a few pills in my pocket, stashed the jar in my coat, and dashed to the ER. With the place being a madhouse, my priority would be cleaning and sterilizing the exam rooms between patients. That, and dumping the perpetually overflowing medical waste bins.

"Code Blue, Pod Five! Code Blue, Pod Five!"

A team of harried-faced nurses raced past me. A high-pitched alarm pinged, way louder than the ever-present *nnnnnnnggg* in my head. Some machine registering another crisis. More running and shouting. I stayed out of the way, putting fresh sheets on a bed in the one empty room. The exam cubes, a series of fifteen curtained-off squares termed pods by the hospital, lined one side of the triage area while desks and monitoring stations occupied the other side, with a wide walkway between. The curtains did nothing to hide the unwelcome sound of someone yelling "Clear!" followed by the *zap-thump* of a defibrillator. An old woman passed me, her face ghost-white and a rosary in her hands. I felt bad for her. Not easy listening to the sounds of medical failure while you waited to learn the outcome of your own loved ones.

A few minutes later I saw the code response team trudge by, the fate of their patient evident in their slow gait and the angry way they tossed their gloves into the bins. You can usually tell how long a person's been working the ER by their reaction to a death. The new ones' faces sag with grief; the lifers' are etched with cold resignation. Rarely did you see confusion, but this time it was apparent in their furrowed brows and backed up by bits of conversation I caught.

"—just don't get it. No internal—"

"—a broken hip? He was stable when—"

Another code alarm went off and they hurried away. I rolled my cart to the pod they'd come from and came to a halt when I saw the body still on the bed.

Middle-aged, his dark complexion ashen from lack of blood and oxygen. No visible wounds. The crash cart sat nearby. Square welts on his chest showed where they'd used the paddles on him. I leaned out, searching for an orderly.

"Hey, we need a transport—" My next words turned to a groan as sudden pain erupted in my skull. An electric buzz accompanied it, like static from a TV when the cable goes out, but with the volume all the way up. I pressed my hands against my temples. Jesus, not now! The pills I'd taken earlier should have dulled my nerves to the point where nothing could trigger a headache. I turned, groping for the visitor's chair next to the bed.

The dead man was sitting up and staring at me.

The buzzing grew worse, drowning out the sounds of the ER. I tried to call for help but shock paralyzed my vocal cords. Then common sense took hold of me. He wasn't dead. His heart had started up again on its own. Rare, but not

impossible. He couldn't be a Lazari. Hell, it hadn't been five minutes yet, let alone three days.

With rational thought came the ability to speak.

"Hey! Hey, somebody! This guy's alive!" Each word stabbed an ice pick into my already shattered skull, but I had to let someone know.

The man slid off the table and stood, his body leaning hard to the left, favoring one leg. I remembered the nurses saying something about a hip injury. "Hey, buddy, you shouldn't be..."

He stepped forward, his eyes never leaving mine.

His dead eyes.

No mistaking it. The dull, empty gaze of a corpse. I'd seen it too many times not to recognize it.

Another wave of static blasted my skull. Colored spots filled my vision and my legs went weak. I collapsed into the chair, fighting to breathe. With a shaking hand I dug a pill from my pocket and dry-swallowed it. Darkness closed in around me. Distant voices called my name, the rest of their words lost in the deafening static. I tried to answer. Help, I needed help. I could feel my consciousness fading, like the time I'd passed out on the beach from heat exhaustion. A similar lassitude filled me, a sense of giving in to the inevitable, my fear receding to a distant thing. The only difference was the non-stop agonizing whine inside my skull, a ghostly drill boring through flesh and bone.

Then the oxy kicked in and the mental torture stopped. The invisible bands around my chest disappeared and I sucked in a huge lungful of disinfectant-tainted air. My vision cleared, leaving just a few opaque floaters whirling around. My ears still rang, but nowhere near as piercing as before.

Someone screamed and I realized the ringing wasn't just inside my head, it was all around me. Dozens of alarms and buzzers going off at once. The patient with the broken hip was gone. I staggered out of the cube and into chaos. Nurses and doctors ran in all directions. Even the techs at the monitoring stations had abandoned their posts. Men and women in civilian clothes shouted for help or joined the mass exodus.

A stocky nurse with dreadlocks barreled past me, shouldering me out of the way like I weighed nothing. Before I regained my balance, a boy in a bloody T-shirt ran after her.

One of his hands was missing.

Other patients marched behind him, all of them with the slack, empty

expressions of death. Some wore exam gowns; others still had on their street clothes, many of them stained with blood.

I turned to run and found myself facing another group of newly risen Lazari, led by the man with the broken hip. With nowhere to go, I did the only thing I could think of.

I leaped over a desk and ducked underneath it.

The alarms and terrified shouting, combined with the static in my brain, prevented me from hearing anything approaching me. Crammed into the tiny space, I covered my head with my arms, closed my eyes, and did something I hadn't done since childhood.

I prayed.

My breath came in rapid gasps and I pressed my mouth against my clenched knees to muffle it. When nothing happened in the first few moments, my terror intensified instead of lessening. It had to be a trick. I pictured them all standing around the desk, waiting for me to foolishly emerge. Time grew impossibly slow, each violent beat of my heart taking minutes instead of seconds.

"Jeremy. Jeremy. Jeremy..."

They were calling my name! The rumors were true, they could speak inside my head. That was how they killed people and I'd be the next to—

"Jeremy!"

Something grabbed my shoulder. I screamed and jerked away, banging my head against a wood panel. My eyes flew open.

Francine Zoumpoulias, my supervisor, peered in at me. Jesus, they'd killed her, too! I tried to kick her away but my feet got tangled.

"Jeremy. It's okay. They're gone. Are you all right?" She held out a hand.

The sound of her voice made me pause. The Lazari don't speak. And the alarms had stopped. I could hear clearly; even the background noise in my head had receded to a normal—for me—level.

"What... what happened?" I let her help me out of the cubbyhole. The ER was in shambles, papers scattered everywhere, IV poles and other equipment on the floor. Splattered blood stood out bright against the pale walls and floors, as if someone had started to create a three-dimensional Jackson Pollock painting and then gave up. Mamoudou Dallo, one of my shift mates, stood a few feet from us, staring at the disaster that was the ER. His face looked the way I imagined mine did, numb with shock and disbelief.

"They all died. Every patient. And then came back. As..." She shook her

head, unable to go on. Her lips pressed together, fear and anger tightening her face into hard angles. I stood up, surprised my legs didn't collapse under me. After all, I'd been wedged into that tiny space for... I looked at the clock over the nearest exit.

Ten minutes?

It had felt like hours. How could—

The *pop-pop-pop!* of automatic gunfire outside made the three of us jump. A few more shots and then it stopped. We looked at each other, unsure of what to do next.

The entrance hissed open and three men in dark SWAT uniforms stormed in, rifles aimed at us. My heart thudded back into overdrive. In that instant, I knew I was going to die, victim of a mistaken identity. Mamoudou cried out and fell to his knees.

I closed my eyes and waited for death.

****

"It doesn't make sense," I said to Francine. We were sitting on a bench, waiting for the bus. "Three days. It's supposed to take three days for them to rise."

She ran a hand through her gray hair. Her tone of voice was sardonic, her words far from comforting. "Kid, haven't you learned anything yet? The government don't know shit. They've been wrong about this since day one. Virus, fungus, whatever it is, it's changing. Mutating. They can say all they want, I believe my eyes. Those patients weren't critical. They shouldn't have died like that. And they damn well shouldn't have risen."

Before I could say anything, her bus pulled up and she stood. "See you in a couple of days, Jeremy. Enjoy the time off. I have a feeling things are gonna get worse before they get better."

She boarded the bus and then I was alone. Mine wouldn't arrive for another ten minutes. That left me nothing to do but think about what had happened. As if I'd be able to do anything else anyhow.

After confirming our living status, the police had corralled everyone who'd witnessed the events in the ER down to the cafeteria, where we'd given our statements, first to a nervous looking patrol officer and then to a detective who

seemed pissed about being assigned to a Lazari detail. Once they finished, the hospital administrator, a gray-haired man carrying at least two hundred pounds of extra weight, told us we had the rest of the day off and the next day as well, because the ER needed to be repaired and decontaminated. That surprised me; there'd been no damage to the structure of the room and it shouldn't take more than a few hours to disinfect the place. Francine said it was their way of giving us some mental health time, for which I was grateful. Lord knew I'd be having some nightmares about what happened.

I tried calling Marnie again. Still no answer. "Marnie, where the hell are you?" My fourth message, plus a couple of texts. I was beginning to freak.

She's just sleeping, I told myself. Or zoning out by the window. She had a habit of not hearing the phone, or forgetting to bring it with her when she went out. Usually I didn't worry but her recent talk about leaving and the beauty of the other side had me wondering if she might do something stupid. She'd never been what you'd call suicidal, but she was damn stubborn. If she really believed the Lazari existed in some kind of paradise, she might very well decide to see for herself.

I wanted to get home, assure myself she was okay, and then we could figure out our next steps. The incident in the ER had me questioning everything I'd believed about the Lazari and the future of the world.

"Things are gonna get worse before they get better." Francine's words kept coming back to me. Were the rumors true? Did the Lazari really possess some kind of supernatural ability to stop a person's heart through sheer force of will?

Rational, scientific thought said no. But those same experts still hadn't figured out how or why the dead returned to life in the first place. Or maybe they had, and they were keeping it a secret. Would it be such a surprise if the government was covering something up? Hell, for all we knew the whole thing was some kind of black ops experiment gone bad, like the conspiracy theorists kept saying. Maybe they'd been trying to create an ultimate weapon or super soldier, one that couldn't be killed.

My bus arrived in squeal of brakes and a cloud of diesel stink. I boarded, my mind still awhirl with lunatic fringe speculations. I couldn't escape them, especially when I saw clusters of Lazari on almost every block, loitering in front of buildings, staring at doorways or windows. Waiting for people to emerge? Sending telepathic instructions through the airwaves? Ideas that

seemed laughably crazy a day ago now caused my stomach to churn with anxiety.

As we pulled up to my stop, I saw a familiar bouquet of color down the street. A woman in a red, white, and blue knit hat and a pink coat.

Marnie!

Relief poured through me and I hurried down the bus steps. She was chatting with a couple in front of a bodega, a grocery bag in her arms. I couldn't see who was with her because their backs were to me, but they could have been anyone. Marnie never had a problem talking to strangers. Anytime, anywhere. Real or imaginary.

Caught up in her conversation, she didn't notice me approaching. Again, not unusual, until I waved and she still didn't acknowledge me.

"Marnie?" I eased by her companions and tapped her shoulder. The musky smell of weed surrounded her like cloying perfume.

"It sounds wonderful," she said, her words obviously not for me. "So wonderful."

I turned to see who had snared her interest so deeply. Marnie's powers of concentration would never be called intense, except when fixed on her own cosmic musings.

Lazari!

I'd never been so close to one, not even in the hospital. Their eyes were a grotesque shade of red on the bottom and gray on top. Their hair hung in limp strands. A faint odor of shit emanated from them, like when you get a little dog crap on your shoe without knowing it and can't figure out where the smell keeps coming from. Tiny wrinkles covered their sagging, gray skin, as if they'd been left in the water too long.

"Yes, this is him," Marnie whispered. That, more than anything about the situation, exceeded my creep factor threshold for the day. I grabbed her and pulled her away.

"Let's go." I looked over my shoulder at the two corpses. "Stay the fuck away from us."

For some reason, it didn't feel stupid to be talking to a pair of corpses.

"Hi, Jeremy." Marnie smiled as if nothing unusual had happened. "How was your day?"

"Not now." I kept a grip on her arm and guided her down the street to our building. She didn't object, keeping pace the entire time, that same dreamy

look on her face that she got whenever her thoughts were somewhere else. I didn't want to know where; the idea that she'd actually been speaking with *them* terrified me.

Impossible, I kept telling myself. Even if the Lazari did have some kind of paranormal abilities, telepathy wasn't one of them. They had no brain function. Except for the bizarre claims of a few psychics no one had reported any kind of communication with the newly risen. And Marnie was no psychic, just a stoner with a history of mild psychosis.

We got inside and I dumped the groceries on the table. When I turned around, Marnie had moved to her usual spot on the windowsill, looking down at the neighborhood. Her version of reality TV. A joint smoldered between her fingers.

"Marnie, listen to me. You need to stay away from the Lazari. They're dangerous. Something happened at the hospital today. I think they caused it."

"It can't last forever." I couldn't tell who she was talking to. Me, the voices in her head, the Lazari down on the street. The fucking window for all I knew. She'd drifted away into la-la land. Rational conversation would be useless until she returned. Emotions warred inside me—fear, confusion, anger—and I took my frustrations out on the groceries, slamming jars and cans into cabinets and practically throwing a piece of frozen meat into the sink.

Marnie never even glanced my way. Just kept up her monolog with her invisible friends. I caught bits and pieces of it, words like "paradise" and "peace" and "stubborn." Captured by the setting sun, she glowed as if surrounded by fiery aura. Forced to wait my turn, I clicked on the television. As I expected, Mercy General was the headline story on every station. Most of them focused on the sensational aspects, the Lazari being put down by the cops, the chaotic aftermath left behind in the ER. But on Channel Six, a long-haired, bearded man in dirty clothes several sizes too large for him sent chills down my back with his comments.

"It's mind control, man," he said. "They did it. The Lazari. There was a bunch of them outside, just starin' at the place. I saw it when I came in. Just starin'. I heard them, too. Right before all the alarms went off. Callin' my name. Freddy, Freddy. Then the place started goin' crazy and I ran outside with everyone else."

The camera cut back to the news anchor, a petite blonde who gave an exaggerated eyebrow lift at the camera. "Thank you for that report, Missy.

Deputy Commissioner Ed Holmdel of the CDC could not be reached for comment but his office issued a statement reiterating their assurance that the Lazari do not possess telepathic abilities and cannot bring about human death through mental coercion. In other news..."

The picture went fuzzy and static drowned out the anchor's words. I reached for the remote but the table and my hand were just as blurred. A sharp pain ran up my neck and into my head. I cursed and headed for the bathroom in a drunken stagger. Too much stress; I needed to take something before the migraine hit full force. I located my Maxalt pills through pure instinct and stuck one under my tongue, the rapid dissolving formula instantly filling my mouth with a bitter flavor. The next thirty seconds stretched on forever while I waited until the pill disappeared before I could take another two oxys with water. Even in that short time, my symptoms evolved. My vision returned but the static grew louder. A thousand voices coming through a distant signal on a broken radio, the noise sandpaper grinding my brain raw.

Back into the living room. Moaning like tortured ghost, I fell onto the couch. Pulled a pillow over my head to block the light and sound. Stupid, I should have gone into the bedroom. The TV attacked my already abraded nerves. I couldn't even lift my head to find the remote. Instead, I pressed the pillow tighter. The noise in my head reached deafening proportions, the entire world talking at once, all the televisions in an electronics store tuned to no signal and the volume at max. I wanted to scream; instead, I retreated into a black tunnel, sinking down, down, down, light and sound receding until my physical world disappeared, leaving me floating in blessed darkness and silence.

And then nothing at all.

****

A sensation of youthful nostalgia filled me as I drifted through that hazy place between sleep and full wakefulness. I was in my bed at my grandmother's house, the windows open to let in the sounds and smells of summer. Insects whirred and chirped, the songs of the warm night lulling me into dreamland. Even the pungent scent of a passing skunk out in the yard didn't upset me. I'd grown used to the smells and sounds of the country from all my vacations upstate. I closed my eyes and prepared to let sleep claim me again. In the

morning there'd be pancakes and—

The raucous *whoop-whoop-whoop!* of a car alarm down on the street shattered my comforting illusion. I sprang up and found Marnie sitting on the coffee table, staring at me.

"What the hell?" My heart pounded triple-time and I clenched the sofa cushion with both hands, struggling to focus on the here and now. The sounds of summer morphed into the unending background noise in my ears. The aroma of Marnie's last joint revealed itself as the source of the skunky odor.

"You disappeared." She reached out and touched my arm, her skin as soft as her voice. "Where do you go?"

I rubbed my eyes. Nothing like waking up to existential questions. "Dreamland," I said, knowing she'd keep asking until I answered.

"You're making things so hard." She sighed and stood up. When she moved, I caught a glimpse of the cable box next to the TV. Almost ten; I'd been out for hours. The sleep and pills had helped, though. My migraine had receded to a dull ache behind my eyes, accompanied by a sort of vague disorientation, like the morning after a few too many glasses of wine. Had it actually been morning, I'd cure it with a cup of coffee. But not this late. Instead, I wobbled into the kitchen and poured a glass of orange juice.

"I made you something," Marnie said. She'd returned to her window perch. I looked around the kitchen and saw a plate on the tiny stove. Peanut butter and jelly on whole wheat bread. My favorite nighttime snack. A rumbling in my stomach reminded me I hadn't eaten since breakfast. I wolfed the sandwich, washing it down with the juice, then joined her at the window.

A group of Lazari gazed up at us. More than a group. A pack. At least twenty of them. I saw more scattered up and down the street, contemplating the buildings.

Where the hell had they come from?

"Everywhere," Marnie whispered. For a moment I almost believed she'd read my thoughts. "We are everywhere and we are one. They say it's beautiful on the other side."

Nope, just another Marnie conversation with her imaginary friends.

The cold seeping through the cheap glass brought new life to the ache in my head. I moved away, glad I could no longer see the Lazari.

"Let's go for a walk." Her hand brushed mine.

"No way. The only place I'm going is bed." I grabbed a blanket off the couch

and tossed it around her shoulders. “You coming?”

“Eventually. Soon I’ll have no choice. It’s hard to wait.”

I kissed her cheek. “Goodnight.”

“I love you,” she said, her gaze still on the window.

“Always,” I replied.

“Forever.” Her customary response.

Except this time I wondered who her words were meant for.

****

Morning found me in front of the TV again, eating cold cereal and watching the seven o’clock news. I’d slept poorly despite my exhaustion and the drugs. Marnie had come to bed sometime after midnight and we’d made love. After that, I tossed and turned most of the night, plagued by dreams where crowds of faceless, naked people whispered my name and told me everyone was welcome in the new world. When I finally gave up on sleep I couldn’t shake a feeling of having lost out on something important. I took two oxys to drive away my malaise and shut the bedroom door so the TV wouldn’t wake Marnie.

The news did nothing to help my melancholy. Stories of unexplained mass deaths around the world filled the news. Hospitals, schools, office buildings, concert halls. Houses of worship weren’t spared, either. And in every instance, the events were followed by all the victims rising up as Lazari within minutes. Top government officials had moved into their emergency operations centers while hordes of terrified, angry people rioted in every major city.

I went from channel to channel, trying to find something that wasn’t rumor or outright fantasy.

“—from the CDC said the matter is under investigation and a statement will be forthcoming as soon as—”

“—the President has been speaking with Prime Minister—”

“—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. This is the Word of the Lord, for he has—”

“—urging citizens to stay inside and avoid—”

“—the White House press conference is scheduled for two o’clock—”

“—the Vatican has remained unusually silent, refusing to speak to the

press while the Pope and his council of advisors remain sequestered in—"

"—Cruise and several thousand of his followers have barricaded themselves in their compound in Texas, where they say they will await the coming of the—"

"—National Guard providing assistance to retermination units in—"

As if on cue, the sound of distant gunfire reached me. Nowhere near our neighborhood. I waited to hear if it drew closer. I'd purposely not looked out the window when I got up. Too many similarities between the walking dead outside and the faceless entities in my dreams.

When the shots didn't repeat, I turned my attention back to the TV.

"—the Biaviians will appear with their mothership, this I, uh, promise. Their prestigious intellects will unleash a magnitude of righteousness, but, uh, there is hope. The symbols I am, uh, selling will protect anyone who wears one by marking them as, uh, chosen—"

"—taken to the NIH, where studies on brain function will—"

"—if communication with the astral plane is possible, as ancient alien theorists believe, then we can only—"

The toilet flushed. A moment later Marnie shuffled into the living room, wearing one of my old T-shirts and rubbing sleep from her eyes.

"'Morning," I said, expecting her to go to the window. Instead, she snuggled in next to me and laid her head on my shoulder.

"Everything's changing. So fast." Her breath tickled the hairs on my neck. I nodded. For once, I knew what she meant. Her fingers caressed my chest and then worked their way down to my thigh. Despite the early hour and my thoughts moving in slow motion, I responded instantly. My hands slid up under her shirt and found her breasts. She slid my shorts down and moved onto my lap. I slid inside her easily and she moaned into my shoulder.

Instead of cooling my ardor, the apocalyptic news playing behind Marnie fueled me. If the world really was coming to an end, this was how I wanted to go. Marnie's body responded, and we built to a crescendo that ended too soon with both of us gripping each other while our bodies locked together.

Afterward, I poured us both more cereal and we ate in front of the TV, purposely keeping to stations that only played movies. We passed the day in that fashion, eating junk food and watching old films we'd seen a million times. We also made love twice more, something we hadn't done in since the late summer, when the Lazari first appeared. Marnie only went to the window

once, to smoke a joint while I made grilled cheese for lunch. I heard her mumble something about wanting to make the most of the time we had left.

As the day progressed, the sounds of sirens and gunshots grew more frequent. I was tempted to turn on the news and see the latest developments but Marnie grabbed the remote and cranked up the volume, a rare thing for her. Usually she complains that having the TV so loud interferes with her other conversations.

The one stain on the whole day was not being able to shake the lingering effects of my migraine. The pressure in my head kept threatening to return, forcing me to take more pills than usual to keep it at bay and leaving me as zoned out as Marnie.

Sometime after dark, Marnie went into the kitchen and fixed us cheese omelets and breakfast sausages. We watched another movie and then went to bed and made love again. I joked about running on empty and I'd be lucky to walk right at work tomorrow.

Marnie spooned in behind me, her breasts pressed softly against my back. "Goodnight," I said, sleep already pulling my eyes closed.

I barely heard her whispered response.

"Marnie?"

Her heaving breathing told me she'd fallen asleep.

I let myself drift off, mentally chiding my poor hearing.

It had sounded like she said "Goodbye."

"Transcendence."

"What?" I glanced at Marnie. She sat on the bed, dressed in baggy pink sweatpants and one of my old sweaters. Morning had dawned gray and cold, with a threat of snow in the air. Her eyes were on the little TV on our dresser; her distant expression gave me no clue if she was watching it or communing with beings on the astral plane.

I returned my attention to getting dressed, a slow process because I kept getting distracted by the news. I'd turned it on out of habit and now I couldn't stop watching. The situation had gone from bad to totally fucked overnight. Retermination units disappearing in droves. Police and national guard, too. Nothing but abandoned vehicles on the streets. Reports of entire city blocks silent and empty.

And Lazari everywhere. On the streets, in lawns, in parking lots. No more

twos and threes, or even tens and twenties. They moved in large groups of hundreds. In some areas they appeared to be swarming like bees. Huge masses congregating in one area and then smaller units breaking off and heading in different directions. Someone had coined the term herds and it stuck.

One of the largest herds occupied the Ellipse across the street from the White House. Reports estimated close to a thousand Lazari there. An even larger herd filled Arlington National Cemetery.

As one veteran newscaster said, staring solemnly into the camera, "It is an ominous sign that there have been no communications with either the White House or the Pentagon since midnight."

Closer to home, a state of emergency had been declared for New York and New Jersey, with tolls suspended on all the bridges and highways. A mass exodus was taking place, people leaving the cities in droves. Highways were backed up for miles and mass transit was useless. I didn't need the TV to know that; the honking of thousands of horns reached us even through the closed windows, as if all the angry geese in the world had decided to migrate at once.

We planned on following them that afternoon.

"I wish we could go together," Marnie said. This time her eyes were on me. Sadness filled them, and I bent down and kissed her. Rarely did she show that kind of emotion.

"Me, too," I said. "But I have to go in today. It's payday. I don't get paid if I don't show, and we'll need that money. I'll duck out during my first break and be home by lunch and we'll get the hell out of the city." A small lie. It wasn't just the money; I needed more pills. My headache had returned sometime around five in the morning, booming thunder and lightning in my skull until I'd eased it with a mix of Excedrin and oxy. I'd been hitting the pain killers hard the last few days and at that rate I'd be out way too soon, with no way of knowing when or how I'd get more if we left town. I'd texted Anatoly, told him I needed as much as he could wrangle. I'd pay double if I had to, which he said was likely. My plan was to withdraw as much as I could from the ATM, get my stash, and then sneak out. Hopefully the cash would last us until we got somewhere and could close out the account from a branch.

"—Reverend Latimer Holmes of the National Church of Jesus on High gave a sermon to more than ten thousand people in Atlanta where he told them to be prepared for the rapture that—"

"—the Speaker of the House reiterated that Republicans were not

obstructing—"

I clicked the TV off and went into the bathroom to brush my teeth and pop another oxy. I shook a few more out, hid them in the pill pocket of my jeans. I never took the whole stash with me; god forbid I lost it, or got arrested for something and they searched me.

When I came out, Marnie had moved to the couch, her gaze fixed somewhere between wall and ceiling.

"It's almost time," she said.

"Yeah. But I'll be home soon." I kissed her again, and she returned it with a passion that almost had me rethinking my decision to leave.

"I love you," she whispered against my lips. "I want us to be together forever."

"I love you, too. And we will be. Always." I grabbed my coat and hat and headed for the door. As it swung shut behind me, I heard her say it was up to me.

Then there was just the silence of the hall and the buzzing in my head.

****

The moment I left the apartment building I had the sinking sensation I'd made the wrong decision. The cold air ignited my headache, driving icy spikes through my brain. I gritted my teeth and dodged a pack of Lazari standing near the entrance. A squirming ball of eels churned in my stomach. I didn't want to end up like the thousands of people dropping dead around the country. But I had to get my pills and money. Besides, if the Lazari really could kill with their thoughts, I wouldn't be safe anywhere until we got well away from all of them.

Another cluster surrounded the bus stop kiosk. The knot in my stomach grew larger when I saw four or five police uniforms in the mix. I had a suspicion I knew the fate of all the retermination teams and cops who'd been working the previous night.

I kept walking. No way I was waiting for a bus near all those dead-heads. Two blocks later I realized it didn't matter. The Lazari were everywhere and I hadn't seen a single bus. Most of the businesses I passed were closed as well, except for one Starbucks. I peered inside. All the tables were empty and one barista stood by the counter, his attention on a TV that was currently showing a

cartoon.

The further I went, the more it seemed like I'd stepped into some alternate world, one where every human except me had turned into a glassy-eyed reanimated corpse. A couple of cars and delivery trucks passed me, weaving their way around the Lazari in the streets. None of them slowed or asked if I needed a ride. Except for the occasional siren and the incessant honking of horns in the distance, the usual noises of the city were had disappeared along with the living inhabitants.

When it became obvious I'd have to walk the entire way, I decided to take the shortcut through the Bannerman Street Park which would lead me to Sutton Street and then the hospital. I didn't relish the idea of being in the secluded park but it was better than walking an extra six blocks in the freezing cold.

As I approached the fountain at the center of the park, I caught sight of a small crowd. I slowed, thinking the Lazari had found this place, too. But then I heard an amplified voice.

"...and the Lord cast his wrath down on the masses! For mankind has been judged, and found wanting. Only the righteous shall—"

I skirted around the edge of the impromptu congregation that listened in rapt silence while a man in a black outfit and white collar called on them to follow him to the river, where they would offer their spirits to God in a holy baptism.

The absence of any dead-heads gave me a break from my anxiety. Once the muscles in my back and neck relaxed, my headache dimmed as well.

My respite didn't last long.

I exited the park and walked to the corner of Sutton and Hudson streets, where I came to an abrupt stop, unable to comprehend the scene in front of me. Across the four-lane road stood the largest group of Lazari I'd seen yet. Hundreds of them lined the sidewalk from one end of the block to the other. All of them facing Brooklyn General. From the back you couldn't tell they were dead; it gave the impression of people waiting for some kind of special event, like a rocket launch or fireworks display.

I'd have to get past them to get inside.

From what I could tell, the undead mob went around the block on both sides. Circling the hospital wouldn't be an option. Neither would creating a distraction; this wasn't a zombie movie, where making a loud noise would draw the creatures away.

The wind picked up and the first snowflakes of the impending storm

peppered my face. I drew my collar up and pulled my knit hat lower, wishing I'd worn something heavier underneath. I was about to make a wide circle of the hospital, in the hopes of finding a break in the herd, when movement on Hudson Street caught my eye.

A car!

Heading in my direction. As it drew closer I recognized it as a police SUV, white with the blue NYPD on the doors and light bar on top.

It came to a stop at the corner and four cops jumped out, dressed in full riot gear, including vests and gas masks. All of them held automatic rifles and they wasted no time opening fire. Blood and bone exploded and several of the Lazari toppled. The rest of them turned in unison, focusing their attention on the officers. The sharp crack of the guns echoed off the buildings and reignited my headache. A group of Lazari split from the crowd and approached the still-firing cops in steady, unhurried steps.

Their departure left a large gap in the cluster.

I stepped off the curb, a crazy plan forming in my head. The timing would have to be perfect. Run too soon, I risked getting shot. Wait too long and the other Lazari might shift and close ranks.

The rhythmic *crack-ack-ack-ack!* of the guns faltered, became disjointed as the Lazari converged on the police. If I hadn't known better, I'd have thought the four men were reloading.

Unfortunately, I was betting on a different outcome.

As it turned out, I was right.

Two of the officers had gone still, guns held at their sides. The other two were shaking their heads and struggling to keep their guns aimed forward. Their movements slowed. Stopped.

The pounding in my head grew worse, the echoes of gunfire still reverberating in my skull. *Run! This is your chance!* my brain shouted at me, but my feet refused to move. One of the cops sank to his knees.

Then all four of them fell over.

Something popped inside my head and my paralysis broke. I raced across the street, terrified they'd make me their next victim. The Lazari near the dead officers turned and headed back to the line. I tried to run faster.

I dodged around a couple that attempted to block my way and then I was past them, sprinting down the sidewalk to the entrance. As I swiped my keycard, I glanced back.

The four officers were rising to their feet.

A soft *click* as the lock disengaged and the door opened. I stumbled inside and ran down the hall to the first bathroom I found. My hands shook so badly that I almost dropped my pills into the sink before getting two into my mouth. I washed them down with a handful of water and pressed my fists against my eyes until purple spots filled my vision. At this rate, I'd need to hit up Anatoly for some IV morphine to get me through the day. I had a fleeting thought that maybe these were side effects of long-term pain killer abuse, a prequel to going deaf or suffering a brain hemorrhage. Common sense told me it was just stress and all the adrenaline coursing through me and I needed to calm down

When you're in pain and surrounded by deadly zombies, common sense doesn't mean fuck.

Deep breaths, I told myself. Get your shit together. I only had to do three things. Get money, punch my time card, and get my pills. Then I'd be free to leave the city.

My detour through the park had caused me to miss the bank I'd wanted to stop at, but there was an ATM outside the cafeteria. Either my headache was losing its power or I'd grown used to the pain, because I was able to step out into the brightly lit hall without groaning. It took a moment for me to get my bearings; I'd entered through a side door I rarely used. Once I saw the sign for Billing, I knew which direction to take. Three turns and two sets of doors and I'd be at the main cafeteria, first floor, right by the elevators.

I'd only made it halfway when the wrongness of the place penetrated the fog surrounding my thoughts.

The building was empty.

No one in the halls. No one in the offices I passed. Moving carefully, I peered through a set of doors at the elevator cubby. Usually there'd be at least a dozen people—staff, visitors, patients—waiting for one the six lifts.

Nothing.

The lights over the doors displayed different numbers—nine, six, twelve, eleven, fourteen, one—indicating they still functioned. But none of them were changing.

I passed through the first set of double doors and the familiar aromas of the cafeteria hit me, drowning out the bitter scents of antiseptic and the stale odor of recycled air that permeated the rest of the hospital. Greasy fries, toasted bread, pizza, soup, burgers, hot dogs, steamed vegetables, stews and pastas.

The mouth-watering mix filled the corridor, thick and heavy as steam in a sauna. From six a.m. to ten p.m., this part of the hospital was a United Nations of food. Not to mention coffee, with six different flavors constantly brewing.

My hopes came alive; maybe someone was here! Perhaps everyone had congregated in the cafeteria, afraid to leave the hospital, waiting for help to come. My pace quickened and I pushed through the next set of doors into the dining area.

Not a soul occupied it.

My pulse thumped a heavy beat against my temples as I tried to think of a time when I'd seen the room vacant. Even after hours there'd usually be a few workers there, eating their home-made lunches or talking on their phones.

I stopped in the center of the long room. The entrance to the food service area was open and the lights on, but even from my distant vantage point I could see no one manned the cooking stations. While I wondered what to do next, the true nature of the food aura gradually seeped through the layers of fear and pain surrounding my brain. No eggs, no bacon, no sweet-syrup smells of pancakes or cinnamon-laden oatmeal.

Just dinners.

That gave me a timeline of disaster. Whatever happened here had occurred last night, before the kitchen closed. Based on what I'd seen on the news, and outside, I felt pretty sure where the crowds outside the hospital had come from. I wondered if the whole place was devoid of life or if the Lazari were disposing of the living floor by floor. There had to be a reason they still surrounded the building. That reason might be survivors.

I prayed Anatoly was one of them.

The ATM worked its magic, spitting out five hundred dollars in twenties. My footsteps echoed in the hallway as I made my way to the ER, causing me to glance behind me more than once. I tried not to think about the hundreds of patients and staff overhead, but stress and a heavy oxy buzz did a good job of fucking up my thought process so that my imagination kept delivering unwanted images, complete with sound effects. The thud of bodies falling to the floor. The pop of tendons as dead muscles twitched and stretched. Opaque eyes opening. The squeak of rubber-soled shoes on tile floors.

It finally got to be too much and I broke into a clumsy run that didn't stop until I reached the ER, gasping like I'd just finished a marathon. As I expected, the waiting room was deserted. So was the triage area, which had been

cleaned and put back in shape since the last time I'd seen it. And apparently used as well, because some of the beds had rumpled sheets on them and the computer monitors were all on.

Seeing the place like a ghost town freaked me out even more and I went right to the locker room. Several locker doors hung open and one of the showers still ran. Steam billowed over the curtain.

"Hello? Anyone in here?" My voice bounced off the tiles and I twitched. If someone had answered I think I'd have jumped right out of my skin. I went to my locker and opened it.

Empty.

No. I'd come all this way and Anatoly hadn't held up his end.

He'd been turned.

I pictured the tall pharmacist, my pills nestled in his pocket, out there among the herd. He might as well have been a thousand miles away. Now what would I do? I couldn't leave the city with what remained in my stash at home. I wouldn't make it three days before my headaches or withdrawal symptoms incapacitated me.

The pharmacy.

Up on the fifth floor. Either there'd still be people there—maybe even Anatoly—or it would be as empty as the ER. I could get the pills myself. Considering it looked like the end of the world might be happening, I doubted anyone would give a shit about me stealing some drugs.

The prospect of that long walk, which meant spending more time in the hospital than I wanted, added another ton of dread to the load already crushing me. But what choice did I have? I stepped into the hall, where two equally awful options confronted me. Climb five flights of stairs or take the elevators. In the stairwell, I'd be trapped if any Lazari came down. In elevators, the same fate, plus the danger of a power failure. Stairs slow, elevator fast.

More than anything, I wanted to get the hell out of there and go home.

Which meant the elevator.

I hugged the wall as I returned the way I'd come, more for emotional comfort than any real protection. The Up button lit when I pressed it and instantly a bell dinged behind me. I gasped and spun around, having completely forgotten one of the lifts was already on the first floor. The doors opened and my heart raced. I fully expected that gaping maw to disgorge a pack of Lazari, all intent on turning my brains to slush. I stared at the empty space for so long I ended up

having to jump for the doors to get in before they closed. I pressed Five and felt the standard vibration as the car rose. Easy listening music played from the hidden speaker and for a second I could almost believe it was a normal day and I'd simply lucked out and gotten an empty elevator, a sort of urban legend in the hospital. You heard of it happening, but never to you.

The elevator dinged and the doors opened. I stepped out, an ingrained response that my legs carried out before I had time to think about it. Then my brain caught up and I darted to the side, glancing in all directions for any signs of movement.

Nothing. Just the *shush* of the doors closing and the crickets in my head.

I headed for the Pharmacy area, which had been moved to the fifth floor almost ten years earlier, during a renovation period where they redid the entire layout of the hospital based on some efficiency expert's report. The department had its own key-coded delivery elevator and a massive storeroom. Five also housed outpatient surgery and a step-down wing for general and elective surgeries.

No one occupied any of the rooms.

In a few, sheets lay on the floor and half-eaten meals sat on trays. I circled the deserted nurses' station and went to the Pharmacy. As I expected, the door was locked. I pounded on the glass and shouted. "Hello! Anyone there?"

No response. I peered through the window. My heart sank at the sight of two neat rows of med carts. Despite being a small hospital, Brooklyn General used the latest security technologies for dispensing medications. Nurses entered specific codes to unlock the carts and the meds were electronically inventoried before and after each round. When not in use, the carts remained in the Pharmacy. For emergencies, each floor had a small drug closet with the bare essentials: Tylenol, glucose and saline drip bags, ibuprofen. Atropine, epinephrine, and a few other items in the crash carts. If an emergency team needed anything special, such as narcotics, they had to call the Pharmacy.

A stupid metal door and reinforced window, and it might as well have been Fort Knox. No way I'd ever get the door open, not without...

A key.

The people were gone, but maybe one of them left a lab coat behind. A lab coat with a swipe key attached.

Desperation and hope overwhelmed fear and I ran from room to room, then to the nurses' station. When none of those placed yielded anything, I tried the

store closets. The break room. The bathrooms. Coming up empty handed again sent me back to the nurses' station where I used a pair of scissors to cut the plastic tag lock on one of the crash carts. I pulled open the doors and yanked out the drawers, spilling vials and needles onto the floor. A quick search revealed no narcotics. I repeated the process on the two other carts, with the same result.

At that point I kind of lost it. I turned over one of the carts, the clatter of metal on tile loud as thunder in the empty space. I screamed and ran down the hall, back to the Pharmacy. Kicked and punched the impenetrable door. Cursed at the top of my lungs until I ran out of breath and collapsed onto the cold floor, my back against the door, my whole body shaking. I took deep breaths, trying to calm myself. Eventually it worked, at least physically. Mentally, I was still a wreck, a ball of mixed emotions all trying to gain the upper hand.

What to do next? The question kept fluttering around in circles in my head. Each revolution brought the same answers. Go floor to floor and try to find another stash. Maybe the Pain Control ward, or back down in the ER. Both places had security just as severe as the Pharmacy, but there was always the chance someone had been in the act of opening a door when tragedy struck.

The only other option was leaving the hospital and breaking into a commercial pharmacy on the way home. That plan held its own potential issues. There could still be people working. People who might call the cops. It would by my luck to get arrested by the last police in New York and end up trapped in jail while the whole world disappeared around me, like that guy in *The Stand* that had to eat rats to stay alive. Hell, it was Brooklyn. The pharmacist might have a gun and just shoot me on the spot.

You're here, try the other floors. Then, if you have to, go to a pharmacy.

Another deep breath and I stood up, my body still buzzing with anxiety-driven adrenaline but at least my shakes were mostly gone. Back to the elevator, where I pressed the button for Twelve.

The familiar hum of an approaching car reached me and I stepped back to see which one. There, the numbers counting down. Eleven, ten, nine...

What happened to the car you rode up in?

The question popped into my head, accompanied by a jagged bolt of pain, at the same time the number changed to seven. The car I used should have opened immediately. If I was the only one in the hospital, it wouldn't have moved from Five. Couldn't have, unless—

Someone called it.

I backed away from the doors until I hit the opposite wall, my head pulsing in excruciating waves that went all the way to my stomach. I fought the urge to vomit and forced myself to use common sense. The Lazari didn't use elevators, which meant someone else was alive in the hospital. A smile came to me. In that moment I wanted—needed!—to see another living person more than anything. I stepped away from the wall as the bell dinged.

"Thank god," I said as the doors swooshed open and the lift disgorged a group of people. Tears of pain blurred my vision but I made out several white coats among them. I wiped my eyes and my sight cleared.

Dead faces gazed back at me.

Easily a dozen of them, staring with a singular intensity so powerful it was like a physical attack. The atmosphere changed, became heavier, the way it does right before a storm, and a sudden pressure constricted my chest, forcing the air from my lungs. The agony in my skull grew worse and I cried out but I couldn't hear myself over the ringing in my ears. Gravity doubled and my legs collapsed. I closed my eyes and grabbed my head, cursing my decision to leave the apartment. I should have stayed with Marnie, like she wanted. We'd be well on our way out of town by now. Instead, I was going to die alone, my heart blown to bits inside my chest by supernatural zombies.

Her face appeared in the darkness, a tear running down her cheek. A vast sadness filled me. I didn't want to go this way. I refused to. If the world had to end, and us with it, we should die together, in each others' arms.

I'm coming, Marnie.

"Hurry." I could almost hear her say it. Her image disappeared, and with it my surrender, replaced by a new sense of urgency. I had to get back before something bad happened to her.

Determination lent new strength to my limbs. Together forever, that was us. I rose to my knees, pushing up despite the weight of a thousand pounds on my shoulders. Groped for the wall, used it to balance myself as I stood. Forced my lungs to work. They resisted but I drew in enough air to remain conscious when the corridor wavered around me.

The Lazari came to a stop, frozen in place less than five feet from me. I staggered away, leaning on the wall for support as I rounded the corner and headed for the stairwell. It took me two tries to push the heavy steel door open and then I almost stumbled right over the railing. The door slammed closed

behind me and immediately the pressure and deafening white noise in my head disappeared, and with it a good amount of pain.

I didn't take time to savor my relief. I had to get home to Marnie. Nothing else mattered. Fuck money, fuck drugs, we'd leave with just the clothes on our backs but we were getting out of the city right away. I lurched down the stairs like a drunk after a three-day bender, clutching the railing for support. When I reached the first floor I exited through a different door than the one I'd entered, which dumped me out by the ambulance bay. If anything, the Lazari herd was larger than before, but I didn't care. I wasn't planning on walking through them this time.

Not when I had my choice of vehicles.

Three ambulances were parked by the patient delivery doors. I climbed into the first one. As I'd hoped, the keys were still in the ignition. For once the Lazari uprising had worked in my favor. Usually the driver stays with the vehicle while his or her partner helps bring the patient into the ER. Which meant that when the Lazari struck, the keys remained behind.

The engine started right away and I slammed my foot on the gas. It accelerated faster than I expected and the tires squealed when I took the first bend. Then it was a straight run right past the visitor's parking lot. I was doing almost thirty when I reached the line of Lazari blocking the exit.

I didn't slow.

The ambulance slammed into the corpses with a thud like someone hit the car with a sledgehammer. The front end slewed sideways and a white-coated body rolled across the hood. Then a series of heavy bumps almost threw me out of the seat. I fought the wheel as the back end went up and came down hard.

Then I was through, racing down the street. I glanced into the rearview mirror and saw several bodies lying in the road. A couple of them wore the blue gowns of patients. Impassive faces turned my way as I drove by but none of the dead heads left the sidewalk. Two more blocks and I lost sight of them. I called Marnie while I drove. Got no answer. Tried again. Same thing. I left a message saying I was on the way home, to be ready to leave.

Something's happened to her. Once I thought it, I couldn't shake the terrible feeling that I was too late. I pressed harder on the gas. Snow splattered the windshield and it took me several harrowing seconds to find the wipers. Five minutes later I skidded to a stop on the slick road in front of our building. I took the keys with me and ran inside. Fuck the law. We were taking the

ambulance out of town.

The unusual silence of the place created an ominous atmosphere that filled me with dread. No music blasting, no voices arguing or children shouting, no televisions blaring.

Please be there. Please.

I climbed the staircase two steps at a time, my breath coming in gasps by the time I reached our floor. It took me several fumbling tries to get my key in the lock. The hushed corridor loomed around me, compounding the sensation of wrongness.

"Marnie?" I threw the door open. "Marnie!"

No answer. My fear doubled. I instinctively looked across the apartment at the windowsill, half-expecting to see her perched in her aerie and half afraid she'd be gone.

The empty sill hit me like a gut punch.

"No. She wouldn't leave me." Except I feared she would. Not because she wanted to, but because she'd be such an easy target for the Lazari. To someone as eccentric as Marnie, the voices in her head and the deadly messages of the Lazari would be indistinguishable.

I wanted to scream. To fall to my knees and cry. To get a gun—or better yet, a tank—and blow away every dead motherfucker in the city. The world. But first I had to be sure. A quick check of the bedroom and bathroom showed them unchanged since I'd left.

The kitchen. My eyes went right to the refrigerator and my heart leaped into my throat when I saw the white square stuck on the door. A note! Marnie always left one if she went out. Hope surged up and I sprinted across the room. She hadn't succumbed to the Lazari, she'd gone for food or snacks or to buy more pot. I snatched the note and opened it.

Jeremy,

I couldn't wait any longer. You're too strong, too stubborn. I had to choose for both of us. It's going to be beautiful. I can't wait for you to be One with us for eternity.

Love forever, Marnie

The world came to a crashing halt. She'd done it. She'd given in because of some deluded belief that the Lazari existed in an extradimensional paradise.

"Goddamn you!" I crumpled the note and threw it at the wall. Now what would I do? She'd left me. The only person I had in the whole world, and

she'd fucking left me.

To become a god-fucking-damn zombie!

A bolt of pain zig-zagged up my neck and into my head. I needed to think clearly and I wouldn't be able to do that with bombs going off inside my skull. I dug into my pocket, pulled out two of the four oxys still in there. Took them and then went to the couch.

You're all alone now.

I tried not to think about how it had happened, but my thoughts kept going there. Marnie at the window. Talking, nodding.

Dying.

Slumped against the window or maybe her body fell to the floor. Motionless. Unbreathing.

And then she'd stood up and walked out the door.

Wait.

The door. It had been shut and locked when I got home. The Lazari didn't close up after themselves.

Maybe she wasn't dead yet!

I jumped to my feet. Marnie had to know I would try and stop her. She'd said it—I was too strong, too stubborn. So she'd had to do it while I was gone. But she'd also said she'd waited as long as she could, which meant she hadn't done it right away. Without knowing when I'd be home, she wouldn't have taken the chance of giving up her life in the apartment when I could walk in at any moment.

She'd committed her supernatural suicide somewhere else. And if she only left a short while ago...there might still be time to stop her.

But where to look?

I tried to think of places Marnie visited on a regular basis. Stores, but she wouldn't go there to die. Not the park, it wasn't close enough to be convenient.

The roof.

It made sense. In the nice weather we'd often take a couple of folding chairs up there and watch the sunset. I'd have a beer while she smoked a joint. Sometimes we'd stay there, just sitting together under the stars and moon, me pretending my damaged hearing was the sound of summer insects buzzing in nearby fields, Marnie carrying on one-sided conversations with her invisible friends. Even in the winter we'd occasionally go up there and just stare out at the city, marveling at how beautiful it looked covered in snow.

Like today.

I ran to the stairwell. Two flights up and sure enough the metal access door was open an inch or two. The gray skies provided a backdrop for the giant air conditioning units, two rusting cubes that topped me by a couple of feet at least. I circled them, then checked the other side of the exit way, where I spotted a pink rectangle on the snow-covered gravel.

Marnie's phone.

"No..." The word escaped me, stealing the last of my hope with it.

I swiped the screen. The message light blinked, meaning she hadn't checked her voice mail. Had she already been gone by then? Or just hadn't answered, afraid I might talk her out of it?

I pocketed her phone. In the end, it didn't matter. She was gone. I'd been too late. Maybe if I'd done things differently, if we'd packed and left that morning, like Marnie said we should...

Tears ran down my cheeks, turned to icy streams in the freezing air. I didn't bother to wipe them away. Cold ate at me from inside and out and I relished it. I wanted to be numb, to escape my feelings. I sat down with my back against the door. Snowflakes floated down around me, larger now, harbingers of the whiteout to come.

Now what?

Only a week until Christmas. We should have been inside, drinking flavored coffees and watching *National Lampoon's Christmas* or *Home Alone*. Or going shopping to buy each other cute little gifts. Nothing expensive, but something to have under the little Charlie Brown tree next to the TV. Maybe even splurge and go to a real movie at the Cineplex.

Instead, I was alone on a frigid rooftop while the world died around me.

Time passed while I reflected on the unfairness of it all. I'd lost the only thing that mattered to me. I didn't know what I was going to do. Life had no meaning without Marnie. Someone else might have just stepped off the building. The end of the world coming, no lover, no friends, no family. But I didn't want to die. I'd fought too hard to survive all these years, and unlike Marnie I didn't believe in the afterlife. Death was just death. The existence of the Lazari didn't change that. They didn't think, didn't love, didn't do anything humans did. They were like a virus, infecting the world, their only purpose to create more of themselves.

Too strong, too stubborn. That's what Marnie had said about me. I didn't feel

strong. But I'd always been stubborn. My mother always told me that from the time I was a kid. And despite my relapses with addiction, I'd proven it. I'd never given in to the headaches, never OD'd or committed suicide or gone crazy. And I wasn't going to give in now.

Stick to the plan, no matter how much it hurt to be leaving the city without Marnie. Pack some clothes, get the fuck out, and try to survive the apocalypse. Maybe there was no place safe, or maybe I'd find some secluded hideaway, a cabin in the woods surrounded by miles of nothing. Wait it out, see what happens. After all, there had to be other survivors. People like me who were mentally strong enough to fend off their psychic attacks.

I could do it. I had to. If I stayed, eventually the Lazari would get to me, just by sheer power of numbers. They hadn't been powerful enough at the hospital but I wouldn't be that lucky forever. I'd felt the force of their assault as they tried to crush my heart.

Get out while I had the chance. The only choice left.

Despite my decision, it took a lot of effort to stand. My muscles had stiffened from the cold and a part of me still had no desire to ever move again. I didn't want to die but facing the new future terrified me. Descending the stairs was the hardest thing I'd ever done, because it meant confronting the empty apartment, knowing Marnie would never return. My personal green mile, only the terrible fate waiting for me at the end of that walk was the rest of my life instead of the end of it.

Two steps in and the apartment already gave off an abandoned vibe. No longer home. Just a place, devoid of life or memories. I stood in the living room and looked around, my brain still moving in slow motion. Pictures and souvenirs that no longer seemed important. What use would they be in the cold, deadly new world? Maybe someday I'd return and they'd be waiting for me. Until then, they might as well be artifacts of an ancient age.

I had my cell phone and my wallet, which held some cash and a single picture of Marnie and me. What else should I bring? What would I need?

The basics. Some clothes, food that wouldn't spoil. My drugs.

That last one was the most important. With my mind floundering in shock, I couldn't take the chance of forgetting them. I went into the bathroom and opened the cabinet. My hand was already reaching for them when I realized they weren't there. Just an empty shelf.

No, not empty. A piece of paper occupied the spot where my oxycodone and

the rest of my meds had held permanent positions the last three years.

Jeremy, I'm sorry but it was necessary. You'll hate me at first but then you'll thank me when we're together. Always.

Marnie's handwriting.

"No. Fucking no!" I read the note again. She couldn't have! Wouldn't have. She knew how badly I depended on them. I checked every other bottle in the cabinet, even though it was obvious they weren't my drugs. Then I grabbed the waste can from under the sink. The familiar orange of prescription jars made my heart jump. I dumped the can onto the floor and heard the gut-wrenching hollow rattle of empty plastic on tile.

Empty. All of them. Oxy, Excedrin, Advil, Tylenol. Even the Maxalt. She'd gotten rid of everything, probably flushed it all down the toilet. At one level I knew that; yet I still ran into the kitchen and dumped that garbage out as well. Yogurt cups and cheese wrappers tumbled across the peeling linoleum. She'd even emptied the bottle of vodka we kept in the cabinet and the six pack of beer from the 'fridge.

All I had left were the two pills in my pocket. My emergency stash had become the only thing standing between me and insanity.

Why? Why would she do it? She knew how awful the pain got, how I couldn't function when the headaches hit. Without my medicine, I'd be a raving lunatic in a day or two, especially when the withdrawal symptoms set in. I'd be lucky if I didn't kill—

That was it.

She wanted me to commit suicide. Either that or weaken my resistance to the point where the Lazari could kill me and co-opt me into their undead cult. This was Marnie's screwed up plan for keeping us together forever.

I can't wait for you to be One with us.

She really believed she'd be waiting for me on the other side. So much so that she'd committed the ultimate sin and then condemned me to death.

Suicide and murder. If there was a Hell, she'd earned a ticket there for sure. I'd never been a religious person, but the concept of karma ran strong in me. If there really was an afterlife, there had to be consequences to pay there for what you did in this world. For all anyone knew, the Lazari were trapped in some kind of eternal suffering, Hell rather than Heaven.

Well, it wasn't going to happen to me.

I loved Marnie. Nothing she'd done was going to change that. But I had no

intention of joining the ranks of the dead-heads. I'd die in my own good time and take my chances with the afterlife. According to my mother and the Church, Marnie's soul should be waiting for me. Along with my childhood dog, Peaches, my father, my grandparents, and anyone else who'd died before me.

"Together always," I whispered to the empty room. "But not today."

The loss of my pills was a major problem, but not an insurmountable one. All I had to do was drive to the nearest CVS, break in, and take whatever I wanted.

I took a deep breath and went into the living room. Turned on the TV.

"—no news out of Washington regarding the disappearance of—"

"—reports of several dozen people emerging from the East River, led by a man dressed as a priest—"

"—Jesus weeps for those who cannot pass through the gates of—"

"—exits from the city are impassable due to thousands of empty vehicles blocking the roads. Herds of Lazari are growing in size near all the bridge and tunnels leading into and out of Manhattan. Hector Gomez is in Chopper One. Hector?"

I stopped on the local news station. I'd need to know which roads had the least amount of Lazari on them. There'd be no driving across any of the bridges. I'd have to get as close as I could with the ambulance and then walk until I came to an opening in the logjam where I could take another car. Based on the aerial view they were showing, it'd be a helluva long walk. The lines of abandoned cars stretched for miles on both sides of every bridge and tunnel.

"It's a real disaster down there, Tonya. I've never seen anything like it. Tens of thousands of Lazari, the people who once occupied all the cars you see, have formed barricades on the highways. The moment anyone tries to approach them... well, there's no gentle way to put it. They die. And then get right back up again as one of those things. Wait, there's someone now, he's moving toward the Lazari. We're going lower for a closer look. For you people watching at home, this video is going to get very graphic in a moment, you might want to send any children out of the—"

The picture tilted sideways as the reporter's voice cut off. There was a quick glimpse of the cockpit, the pilot's mouth open wide below his goggles, and then a dizzying view of the sky and earth exchanging places over and over. The anchorwoman's voice shouted in the background. *"Hector? Hector? Can you hear us? Oh, my god!"*

I didn't want to watch but I couldn't look away. The images sped by. Gray clouds. Traffic jam. Clouds. Lazari looking up. The helicopter banking away in a steep dive. The Lazari, much closer. A man in a business suit, jacket flapping, arms spread, face emotionless.

Black.

The image changed. The newswoman's face now, her eyes wide with horror, her face almost as pale as her white blouse. She opened her mouth but no words emerged. Without a sound, she fell sideways out of her chair.

I turned the TV off. I didn't want to see what came next. In my head, I saw not her but Marnie standing up, eyes blank as a fish's.

The world was spiraling into chaos faster now. I had to get out of the city before total anarchy set in. Forget packing, I'd steal what I needed on the way. I grabbed my phone and Marnie's, a charger, and a bottle of water. Stuffed some granola bars in my pocket. Then I left, not even bothering to shut the door. Maybe the place that had been our home could shelter some other survivor.

The pounding in my head was back, and the tightness around my chest. Ordinarily I'd have attributed it to stress but after the events at the hospital and what I'd seen on the news I had a suspicion my discomfort stemmed from another source. I couldn't help picturing the hundreds of thousands—maybe millions by now—of Lazari occupying the streets, focusing their mystical powers on the few remaining living people in the city. A dome of dark energy descending onto the buildings, tendrils of black death weaving between buildings and seeping under doors. I automatically reached for my pills and then stopped as I remembered—again—that they had to last until I found more.

But that will never happen if you die before you get to any.

Indecision gripped me. If the pain of resisting the Lazari incapacitated me, I'd never get to the medicine I needed. But if I took the pills and they wore off before I got to a pharmacy, I'd be as good as dead.

"Fuck!" My shout bounced down the hallway and back again. The walls lost their focus, shimmered, and then returned to normal, except for a few colored spots orbiting at the periphery of my vision.

Take them. I'd have four, maybe six hours of protection against the pain. More than enough time to find a store and break in.

I swallowed the pills and prayed I'd made the right decision.

After a few deep breaths, I headed down the stairs. For the first time in

months, I noticed the peeling paint, the dust and dirt piled in the corners, the faint odors of old urine and cigarettes. We'd grown complacent in our cheap apartment. Maybe things would've been different if we'd had a little more money. If my mother had helped us instead of cutting me off.

Bitter resentment lent strength to my arms as I shoved the front door open. My momentum carried me halfway down the steps before I saw the people on the sidewalk.

No, not people. Lazari.

An entire herd. Standing between me and the ambulance. More of them filled the road and blocked the sidewalk on either side of my building, preventing me from going left or right. I understood the source of the pressure crushing my ribs and skull. They were using superior numbers to pick the last survivors off one by one.

The herd stood at least twenty deep; no way I could push through and drive away. Thousands of dead, gray eyes bored into me. The static in my head grew worse and my brain twisted the sounds around until it felt like I'd fallen asleep next to a radio stuck between two distant stations where only random bits of words came through.

Shhhhhzzzzzhmmmm—eremy—zzzzznnnnng—jere—zznnngggssssss—usss —nngzzzz—here—nnnng

My stomach did a flip-flop and my vision blurred and then returned, blurred and returned. The faces, slack and gray. Some of them seemed familiar. Neighbors? I tried to focus on them. A man in a UPS uniform. A woman wearing a waitress's apron. A couple of teenagers with too many tattoos who I was sure I'd seen loitering around the neighborhood before. An older woman with a narrow face and an expensive coat stood at the front of the horde, her silver hair the same as my—

Mother's?

Oh, Jesus.

It was her. Standing right at the bottom of the stairs, her severe blue gaze transformed into an equally cold and unreadable opaque stare aimed right at me.

I turned and ran.

There was no thought, no internal debate. I simply reacted. Up the stairs, into the building, and through the first floor corridor to the back exit, which opened into a long alley occupied by two dumpsters and a thriving colony of rats. I hit

the latch bar with my hip and the door with my shoulder, never pausing in my blind flight. The metal door flew open and I stumbled into the alley.

Which was filled with Lazari.

A flash of pink in the first row.

Marnie.

Her cheap ski jacket stood out like a beacon. The red, white, and blue hat hid her blonde hair but her face...oh, Jesus, her face. It was awful.

Because there was nothing wrong with it.

She looked very much the same as the last time I'd seen her. A hint of a vacant smile turning up the corners of her lips. Eyes staring off into the distance. The pallor of her cheeks could easily be from the cold rather than an absence of circulation.

As I stared, snowflakes landed on her nose and lips.

They didn't melt.

"Oh, Marnie." Something in me broke when I saw that. My heart, my soul. My determination to escape. This was no random herd of Lazari. They'd come specifically for me, led by the only two people in the world who knew how to get inside me, understood my weaknesses, my needs.

I backed into the building. No point in running this time. They had me trapped. Only two exits from the building. I returned to my apartment and shut the door. Not because I thought the Lazari would come inside. That wasn't their way. No, I did it because that's what you do when you enter your home. You shut the door. It's habit. Just like hanging up your coat, getting a soda from the refrigerator, and sitting on the coach. All of which I did.

There was no thinking involved. I operated on instinct, moving robotically, unable to comprehend everything that had just happened. My brain was numb, the buzzing white noise my only sensation.

I turned on the TV. Static. *Click.* Static again. I pressed the channel button again. And again, my thumb on automatic. Static. Static. Static. The sounds from the TV indistinguishable from those in my head. *Click. Click*. Lucy and Ricky in black and white. *"Rickeeeee!"*

Click.

Static. *Click. Click. Click.*

"—you know how to take the reservation, you just don't know how to 'hold' the reservation—

Click.

"—this is the end of times! The Lord God Almighty has delivered unto us the his judgement and the Four Horseman have risen to—"

Click.

Static. I tossed the remote away. White noise for the ears and the eyes. The black and white pixels held my eyes, much the same way as a camp fire will when you're tired or stoned. Patterns appear, complex movements among the random flickerings. In the sounds as well. Beneath the uniform *sssschhhhsssssshhhccccuuuussssh*. Whispers. Bits and pieces of words. Not necessarily English, or even any earthly language. You know it's not real but you can almost believe it is. Digital speak between pieces of equipment. AIs communicating with each other. Signals from other planets.

Or perhaps just the beginning of insanity.

I forced myself to get up. Took three steps and then stopped. Where to go? I glanced around the apartment.

The window.

I knew what I'd see before I even looked down. A pink coat at the front of the herd. She'd come to the front of the building. Her pale face staring directly at me. She'd lost her hat and snow had turned her blonde hair silver in the glow of the streetlights. It made her look old and young at the same time. The way I imagined she would have if we'd gotten to spend another forty years together. My vision grew distorted as tears filled my eyes.

Marnie was dead, and soon I would be, too. Just like she'd planned.

A familiar figure moved up next to her. My mother. The two of them, who'd never spoken a single word while alive—had never even met each other—now stood shoulder to shoulder like mother and daughter-in-law with a shared goal: to kill the one thing they had in common.

It was almost enough to make me believe Marnie had been right, life after death did exist. Vestigial memories, the rational part of my brain reminded me. The Lazari knew how to walk, to turn corners, to use stairs. It made more sense that they'd retain some muscle memory, force of habit guiding them to familiar surroundings.

I couldn't bear to think that Marnie was still alive inside a walking corpse and actively trying to turn me into one as well.

Watching them watching me brought me to tears again and I had to turn away. I didn't want to go back to the couch. Or the bedroom. Time slowed. I breathed in the stale remnants of Marnie's pot and stared at the apartment, my lethargy

back in full force. I had no desire to think or move or make any kind of decision.

The kitchen. As good a destination as any. I moved across the room like an old man, shuffling my feet because I lacked the strength to lift them.

I collapsed into one of the kitchen chairs. Stared at the table for awhile. Looked at my hands. Pale. Like Marnie's. I missed her. My eyes went to the window. Something missing. Her. I took my phone out. Opened the picture I'd taken. So beautiful. A moment of perfection captured in time. Had it really been just a few days ago? I studied it. Tried to remember what I'd been thinking at that moment. A distant memory, already fading.

Glass rattled against wood. I stood up, my heart racing, positive I'd see Marnie outside, tapping on the window. But no, only the wind. The storm growing stronger. I felt the weight of the Lazari's attention on me, a physical presence that grew heavier each minute. If I stood there long enough, would I simply collapse from it? Fall down and expire like all the others I'd seen? Did it happen the same for everyone?

At some point, I decided I didn't want to die on the floor. Better someplace comfortable. The bedroom was too far away so I went back to the couch. The television still showed nothing but static. Snow inside, snow outside. December in my soul.

The static captured me again. Dancing patterns, back and forth, around and around.

Around and around.

Tsssssssschhhuuuusshhhccccck

So pretty. So relaxing. I closed my eyes. Nothing but static. Peace. I closed my eyes.

When I opened them, the apartment was dark, the only illumination the bluish-white glow of the TV that continued to play its digital blizzard. The sounds of the electric storm inside blended with the shushing winds of the gale outside. The red numbers on the cable box showed I'd slept the afternoon and half the night away; it was after midnight.

I had no idea what had woken me, although I had a vague recollection of dreaming about Marnie and my mother having lunch and talking about me. What I did know was that I felt like shit. My head ached something fierce and my stomach felt queasy. Plus, I had to pee. I stood up and the room tilted. I sat down again as a surge of dizziness overwhelmed me. Sweat poured down the

back of my neck and a feverish heat filled me. My temples throbbed in time with my heart. Fast, much too fast.

The Lazari are attacking me again. Can't let them win.

I tried standing again and this time kept my feet. The roiling in my guts grew worse. Water. I needed water. I moved to the sink, poured a glass. Brought it to my lips, my hands trembling, spilling some. Drank.

Dropped the glass as my stomach erupted.

I vomited into the sink, clear, yellowish liquid. No food since the morning, nothing left in me. Cramps attacked my belly and I doubled over. This time nothing came out except a mouthful of stomach juices that burned my throat. I spat acidic phlegm and clutched the counter to keep from falling. Waves of hot and cold rolled through me, causing me to shiver. A kind of groaning whimper escaped me as I recognized what was happening.

Not the Lazari this time.

Withdrawal.

It'd been more than ten hours since my last pill. The first time in years since I'd gone that long without filling my system with chemicals.

You can do this. You've done it before.

Yes, but never alone, trapped in an apartment, without medical help. In the rehab centers they give you methadone, supplements, vitamin drinks. Pills for the nausea and the runs. Migraine meds.

It'll just be harder.

Right. Comparing cold turkey to a gradual detox is like comparing climbing Everest to a Sunday hike in the woods. Not even twelve hours in, the worst was still yet to come. I splashed water on my face and clenched my teeth against another round of cramps.

Damn you, Marnie. The next forty-eight hours were going to be a living hell.

Right on cue, my stomach clenched again, only this time the pressure was lower. I staggered across the apartment, balancing myself on pieces of furniture. Halfway to the bathroom I knew I wasn't going to make it but I kept trying, squeezing my ass cheeks tight and lurching the last few yards.

My bowels gave way just as I reached the door and hit the light, hot liquid squirting into my pants and running down my legs. I fell to the floor, my head narrowly missing a fatal collision with the toilet. The smell of shit filled the small room and I dry heaved again.

I pulled myself across the tiles to the tub. Gripped the edge. Another dizzy

spell hit and I hung there, one arm over the lip, the other pinned beneath me. The noises in my head rose in volume, became deafening. A million televisions now, filling my skull with static and random stations. Garbled words, sentences mixed together.

I put my head down against the tub. The cold felt good. I closed my eyes. The volume grew unbearable.

Everything disappeared.

I came to in the middle of a blizzard, lost in an endless expanse of white. White noise, white landscape. Everywhere. Inside and out.

sssschhhhsssssshhhccccuuuussssh

The end of man in surround sound.

A terrible sense of failure came over me. The Lazari had won, I was dead, and this was the so-called paradise Marnie had promised. What a joke. No heaven, just—

Sssschhhhsssssshhhccccuuuussssh Jeremy we sssschhhhsssssshhhccccuuuussssh want to sssschhhhsssssshhhccccuuuussssh with us chssssssss

"What?" I had no body, but my mind spoke the word.

Ssschhhcchh Jeremy. We are here. I am here. Ssschhhcchh Waiting. For you. Join us. We are One. There is more, so much more.

"Marnie?"

Yessschhhcchh.

And me.

"Mother?"

We can be together. Everyone. Ssschhhcchh All of us. The world. Everything. One. Join us.

Join them. A flicker of hope ignited in my soul. I wasn't dead! Not yet, anyhow. Still a chance...

I opened my eyes to bright light and bitter cold. I still lay sideways on the bathroom floor. When I tried to sit up, every muscle bellowed in protest. A debilitating weariness filled me. I'd been dreaming again. About Marnie. My mother.

No dream, Jeremy. We are here. Waiting.

"Marnie?" I sat up, adrenaline forcing away some of my listlessness. "Is it really you?"

Yes. I'm here. We're all here. Waiting for you. You are the last, Jeremy. Join us.

The chill inside me expanded, waves of cold coursing through my body. Not a dream. Marnie still existed in some supernatural way. She'd been right all along. Speaking to the dead the entire time. Trying to tell me...

Yes. You can hear us now. The barriers are broken, your mind is free.

Barriers...? The only thing that felt broken was my skull. Every nerve afire, as if something had exploded in my head, sending shards of bone into the crevices of my brain. But the nausea was gone, and the fever, meaning my body was flushing the last vestiges of the drugs from my system, leaving me...

The drugs.

It all made sense now.

The headaches. Marnie's comments. To me. To them. She'd held off joining the Lazari because she refused to leave me behind. She wanted us to cross the bridge together.

Yes. Together. All I wanted.

All this time, the drugs had protected me. Had prevented me from hearing them, prevented the Lazari from getting into my head. They'd saved me.

So she'd thrown them out.

Jeremy. There isn't much time. We are becoming One. I want you with me.

I dragged myself to my feet. Every fiber of my being cried out as I moved. Not just withdrawal. Pressure on me, from every direction. The Lazari, still imposing their will on me. They hadn't broken through, though. Holding back? Because of Marnie? Or were the remnants of the drugs in my system still keeping them at bay? I crossed the room, my jeans stiff with dried shit, bouncing from couch to table to windowsill like a wino.

Marnie still waited on the sidewalk, one of a million dark shapes against the deep snow that covered everything.

Hurry, Jeremy. We are One. We are everything. Our world is beautiful.

Something stabbed at my heart. Invisible daggers jabbed my back, my head, my limbs. My barriers were broken, my walls coming down. I wouldn't last much longer. My body weak, my mind defenseless. Marnie had been right. What did that mean for the teachings of organized religion? Did her soul still exist? My mother's presence certainly seemed to indicate the Catholics had gotten it wrong. Or did it? Had she simply been weak? Judged and found wanting? Maybe there was more than one afterlife. If one existed, why not all

of them? The only question was, how would I meet mine?

On my own terms, I decided. And that meant taking care of some things before I took that big step, crossed the divide.

I refused to die covered in my own shit.

"A little more time," I whispered to myself, but Marnie answered.

"Hurry. We cannot wait much longer."

The pressure eased, like rising to the surface from a deep dive. I was still weak as a newborn but I managed to return to the bathroom, strip off my soiled clothes. Into the shower. The water freezing but I hardly noticed. Just a rinse, and then I wiped myself clean as best I could with a towel. Marnie's towel, surrounding me in apple blossoms.

Back to the bedroom. Clothes. Jeans, sweatshirt, socks. Cold outside. Did the dead feel cold? Did they feel anything? No answer from Marnie. Shoes. My coat. What else?

My phone. I would need that.

I stuffed it into my coat pocket and went to the door. This time I didn't look back. There'd be no returning. Not to the apartment, not to the world I knew. When I reached the stairs, I went up rather than down. I'd made my decision. Marnie had given up her life on the roof because it was our place. I would do the same, for the same reason.

Wind and snow struck me as I pushed open the door. Freezing rivers ran down my neck and filled my shoes. The drifts were halfway to my knees and I wished I'd worn boots. Then I laughed. In a few minutes it wouldn't matter. I reached the edge above our apartment and knelt, bitter cold leaching the last of my strength away. I peered over and as I expected, Marnie was there, her pink coat a beacon. My mother stood next to her, both of them staring up at me.

"Come to us, Jeremy. Be with us. Be One."

I took out my phone. Opened the picture I'd taken of her. Marnie, a study in melancholy. She looked beautiful. My love, not as she was now, as she'd been.

"Always together," I whispered, and kissed the screen. Then I placed the phone back in my pocket and stood.

"Yes, together. Always," she replied, her voice overlaid by a million others. She was almost gone, almost One.

I stepped onto the edge.

"Jeremy? What are you—?"

Something exploded inside me just as I jumped. My head, my heart, the full

force of the Lazari hitting me as Marnie and the others realized my intention. What she should have known all along. I could never be one of them. Not even for her. Maybe what I planned was technically suicide, but I preferred to think of it as doing the right thing and avoiding the temptation of eternal sin.

Mother, I hope your definition of sacrifice was right.

Reality slowed to a crawl. The cold disappeared. I felt nothing, heard nothing. My smile grew wider. Silence! Finally, after all these years. The faces below me grew larger in flickers, like progressive images taken by a camera. Marnie's face, expressionless, although I sensed her surprise.

The herd drawing closer.

Coming together.

Raising their arms.

No! I saw their plan the same time Marnie's thoughts reached me.

"Together, always."

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