

Bleed
Ed Kurtz

BLEED

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*But see, amid the mimic rout,
A crawling shape intrude!
A blood-red thing that writhes from out
The scenic solitude!
It writhes!—it writhes!—with mortal pangs
The mimes become its food,
And the seraphs sob at vermin fangs
In human gore imbued.*

*—Edgar Allan Poe,
“The Conqueror Worm”*

1923

Papa comes back at night. Three days he's been gone and she is beginning to see a glimmer of hope that he'd never come home. Everything would be just fine if he didn't. Agnes is old enough and in just a few more years she will be, too. Without Papa around the time will fly like a hawk. But he comes back in the moonlight, the darktime when Papa gets dark thoughts to do dark things. She hears him come into the house, the creaking hinges on the door and the groaning floorboards as he pounds loudly through the house. He grumbles and moans and sings a little ditty he makes up as he goes along. "Ah'ma teach 'at girl ev'rything Ah know, as soon as Ah finish this drink...Ah'ma open 'nother bottle and take a drink, as soon as Ah teach that girl..." The words come out wet and syrupy as though the liquor has filled him up too much and now its bubbling up out of him. He sounds maybe a little happy, but that's the worst time. He never does anything as bad as when he's feeling good. Anger only makes him sulk and drink and go to sleep. Feeling good makes him visit in the darktime, all reassuring whispers and scratchy, sandpapery hands. Still singing and crashing around the house in the dark, he must be feeling good. She shudders and pulls the quilt up to her chin. Her eyes bulge despite the blackness in the room. Beside her Agnes does not stir at all. She's dead to the world, long inured to Papa's darktime fumbblings and doubtlessly relieved that she was

no longer the only one. In the hall he stumbles over some timber and tools, the supplies he's collected or stolen to build his attic. Wood scrapes against wood and an iron instrument clangs sonorously. Papa shouts and curses. She holds her breath, listening. Maybe he'll grow too angry for what he came to do. Maybe he'll turn mad and drink some more, kick a hole in the wall and black out on the floor. Please god, please. Make Papa madder than he's ever been before. Make Papa forget all about darktime and Agnes and me. She squeezes her eyes shut until they are replaced by small pink mounds of wrinkled skin, begging the Lord to intercede, but she expects nothing in response. God does not listen to her, never has. A thousand times she beseeched the almighty to strike the foul old lush dead, take him out of this world and out of their lives. Surely no loving and personal god would suffer a sinner like him to live. In her heart, she was sure she heard god laugh at her request. Suffer like Job, he jibed her. Suffer and be saved. She does not want to suffer. Not anymore. "Ah'ma teach 'at girl...ev'rything...Ah'ma teach..." Oh no. Papa is not angry at all. He is happy as a pig in shit. Papa is both the pig and the shit. Tears squeeze out of the corners of her eyes and she sinks further down under the quilt. She moans Agnes' name. The older girl fails to respond. Is she still asleep in spite of all this racket? Or is she deliberately ignoring the miserable, terrified child beside her? Agnes! Agnes! A hundred thousand darktime nightmares have turned out this way, with

Papa on the prowl and Agnes frozen or dead and unable to help her. This is no nightmare, though. This is the real thing and it is darktime now and Papa's black sinister shadow is looming in the doorway, leering at her with tiny too-far-apart eyes that glint in the gray moonlight coming in through the window. She shuts her eyes and remembers Agnes telling her to play dead if she ever comes across a bear in the woods. Just play dead, just play dead, just like Papa was a grizzly come to gobble me up. She doesn't open them even when she hears the heavy, shuffling steps stagger into the bedroom, compounded by the chilling jangle of Papa's belt buckle unfastening and clanging against his leg. "Gunna teach 'at girl...gunna teach her good..." Her behind contracts as her spine sends a shockwave shiver up to her shoulders. But her eyes remain closed. No sense in opening them up anyhow; it's dark as a pocket in here. She waits for him, for the bed to sink down on one side with a sickening squeal, for the coarse sandpaper hands to start their business. She hears the springs squeal, but she feels nothing at all. Agnes stirs. Moans softly. Papa lets out a gurgly chuckle, sounds like he's drowning in his own spit. Agnes! Oh, Agnes, poor Agnes! Pulling into a tighter ball, her knees touching her chin, she trembles and cries but is careful to not make a sound. Papa might hear. He might change his mind. Got to let him take it out on Agnes, leave me be for one night just one night of peace please god just one night. Her brain reels. Guilt fills her up, sours her

stomach and leaves a nasty taste on her tongue. It is not right to wish that kind of thing on her sister, not Agnes who takes care of me just fine when Papa's away who'd be the best Mama she ever knew if only Papa would go away and never come back round again. Huffing, snuffling. Papa grunts like a hog. Agnes sniffs. She wants to scream. But she is quiet as a mouse when she slips out of bed and pads softly out of the bedroom, through the hall, into the kitchen. Even here she hears the horror in the bedroom. Huff, huff, huff. Grunt, grunt, grunt. The pig and the shit. She climbs up onto a chair, steps higher yet onto the table. She can reach the ironware from up here. Old and rusty, mostly. Mama's old Dutch oven, belonged to great grandmammy, and the griddle and the pots and the big black skillet. That is the one she wants. She needs both hands to get it down from the sixteen penny nail in the wall and it's heavier than sin but she gets it and carries it carefully, quietly back down to the floor. Clutching the cold iron to her chest, she pads back to the bedroom, frowning at the nauseating, soul-crushing noises she walks toward. But she needs the noise, needs it find them. Him. She follows it, rounding her own narrow bed until her hip bumps Agnes'. The thin, soiled mattress shakes and quivers. She feels the heel of Papa's boot brush her side. With a grunt of her own she heaves the massive skillet, hoists it over her head. It is only the work of a moment to send it crashing back down—its own weight does most of the work. She expects it to ring out like a bell

but there is only a dull crack as the heavy edge sinks into Papa's skull like it was nothing but pudding. He does not even cry out. She let the skillet drop out of her hands and it bangs loudly on the floor, cracking the wood. Agnes screams. She presses her body against her sister's and the tears flow. Agnes is splattered with Papa's blood and hard bits of bone.

It is done.

SUMMER

The Stain on the Ceiling

Chapter One

The house was a fixer-upper, at least in Walt's eyes. It was a gable front house—a cottage, really, due to its single story—that the realtor claimed was built in 1930. There were ornamental brackets on almost all of the doors and windows and a small crawlspace attic under the sharply angled roof. Upon seeing the house for the first time, Walt immediately fell in love with the double-hung sash windows and their clapboard siding. It was all just so quaint and lovely and perfect for his needs. The realtor, a dowdy schoolmarm sort of woman, had not even tried to skirt the truth of the house's less than ideal condition. The walls needed patching, the moldy wallpaper had to be stripped, and all of the rotted baseboards were going to have to be replaced. Both bathrooms suffered from leaky toilet seals that had all but annihilated the subfloors, which needed to be ripped out and completely resurfaced. There was no carpeting in the house—another selling point for Walt—but the hardwood floors were terribly scratched with deep, dark grooves cut into the wood everywhere he looked. That would require refinishing.

And that was just the interior; the roof was another can of worms altogether.

Nonetheless, Walt was inspired by the work that lay ahead of him, and he got the house for a song. By the time the school year began in late August, he figured he would be well on his way to having the place right

where he wanted it. By Christmas morning, when he finally got around to unburdening himself of the secrecy of the diamond ring in his sock drawer, Walt thought the house would be in perfect shape for a young couple with modest family ambitions.

Things were looking up.

Walt moved in on a Tuesday. The apartment in which he lived for the last three years had become crowded with his growing catalogue of belongings, but the square footage of the house far exceeded that of his former residence. Now Walt had space to spare and, as he looked at it, space to fill. For the time being, he simply unloaded box after box from the truck he rented, stacking them against the walls of the dining room. With the exception of his meager furniture—a bed, a sofa, and a small antique writing desk—the entirety of Walt's worldly possessions fit into that single room. He smiled at the hoard, imagining where everything would end up and what odds and ends he would need to pick up in order to fill the gaps. It was exciting.

In the meantime, Walt hopped into his aging hatchback and drove to the hardware store in town, stopping at a burger joint en route. In his head he had a massive list of repairs and the supplies needed to make them, but he was far from overwhelmed by it. Rather, with every tube of caulk or foot of baseboard he set in the rolling cart, Walt felt more and more like the real

live grown-up he never thought he would actually become. While he pushed the cart up one aisle and down the next, he conceived of every minute detail of his life for the next year or so. For some, he realized, this would be an anathema. But for Walt it was terrific; he knew he was going spend the remainder of the summer working on the house, begin his new career as a ninth grade English teacher in the fall, and with a little luck, complete his short story collection before the end of the calendar year. Then, on Christmas Eve, he would present the ring to Amanda (to which she would almost certainly say yes), and the spring would be taken up with plans for their eventual wedding.

Walt practically danced to the register to pay for his overfilled cartful of supplies, pushed them out to his hatchback in the parking lot, and then drove home, unaware of his own joyful humming along the way. By dusk, he had already ripped out every inch of baseboard with his brand new crowbar. He replaced most of it before midnight, but he underestimated the amount needed. Another trip to the hardware store would be needed in the morning; he made a mental note of it.

Now Walt was finally wearing down. He located the box marked *kitchen* among the stacks in the dining room, unpacked his coffee maker for the morning, and then dragged himself to the bathroom to brush his teeth. He meant to assemble the bed frame earlier, but he had not gotten around to it. He was not about to fool around

with it now, though—he was just going to have to sleep on an unraised mattress. No big deal.

The final task of the day was to shut off all the lights in the house before turning in. Half of Walt's lamps remained packed up, so that was not much of a job at all. He got the kitchen light, the lamp on the dining room floor where he had run out of baseboard, and the glaring overhead light in the living room. He made another mental note to replace that bulb with a lower wattage. Walt then shuffled down the short hallway leading to his bedroom, where he switched on the small rice paper lamp he had plugged in beside the bed. He figured on reading a little M. R. James until his eyelids grew heavy and then call it a day. So he crawled beneath the sheets and fluffed the pillows and took in the musty smell of his new, old house. It was then that he first noticed it: in the hall, just beyond the bedroom door, there was a tiny brown stain on the ceiling.

The stain was barely visible in the dim light of the rice paper lamp, but Walt could make it out well enough. No bigger than his own fist, it was splotchy and the color of rust. Water damage, he considered, due to the leaky roof. Another mental note for the pile, he thought.

By then he was too tired to focus on reading. Walt switched the lamp off and was asleep in minutes.

Chapter Two

The roof had more holes than Walt bargained for. Most were tiny; scattered dots of morning light sneaking in from above. Hail damage was a distinct possibility, but Walt bet on nothing more than pure age and neglect as the culprit for the constellations of miniscule chinks in his castle's armor. A few of the holes, however, were startling sizeable, big enough for a child to crawl through. If there was a problem with nine year old cat burglars in the neighborhood, Walt was in trouble. Barring that, he was going to have to address the issue before the next rainfall.

The attic was small and stuffy, the hot, suffocating air ripe with the odor of mildew and mold. The pink insulation on the attic floor had gone almost white with age and it was spongy from the moisture let in by the holes. That was also going to have to go. Looking back up at the roof, Walt could detect no sign of flashing having been installed. No one had ever taken steps to waterproof the roof at all, from the looks of it. Walt pursed his lips and sighed. This one was beyond his ken as a home-improver. He was going to have to call in a contractor.

In the meantime, Walt aimed his flashlight at the attic floor. He challenged his memory to recall the house's floor plan so that he could determine what was underneath each patch of mold insulation and every supporting beam. Although by no means picture perfect,

Walt's memory was good enough for the task at hand. He was standing directly over the guest bathroom by his reckoning, which put the hallway outside the master bedroom on the other side of the attic. Gingerly, he stepped on the sideways beams until he traversed the unventilated space. On that side, most of the cottony insulation was missing, taken up and away by some previous owner and never replaced. Walt decided there was a good ten by ten area of naked rafters and warped board flooring in that part of the attic. There were a couple of pinkish rolls of insulation jammed into a nearby corner, but these too were damaged beyond usefulness by the moisture. Another item for the shopping list that would not die.

Walt smiled and shrugged, perfectly happy in the role of the hardworking homeowner. The smile diminished, however, upon looking closer at the bare floor before him. This was indeed the part of the attic just above his bedroom and its adjacent hallway, but there was no water damage of any kind. Walt glanced up, and to his puzzlement discovered that the roof there was intact. His mystery stain continued to baffle him.

Back in the kitchen, Walt plugged his phone into the jack on the wall and began flipping through the yellow pages in search of a roofer. He chose the first one with a cute ad (it featured a cartoon roofer with the crack of his ass peeking out of his pants) and arranged for an estimate the next day. Things were moving along.

Feeling satisfied with his efforts, Walt poured a glass of ice water and ambled out to the front porch. He sat on the steps and enjoyed the clean, warm summer air. It contrasted nicely with the cold water in his glass.

The nearest house to his new property was several acres away, far enough that he could not see it for all the intervening trees. Walt did not own all of the land leading up to that neighbor's border—whoever he or she was—rather, some conglomerate laid claim to it and was holding on to the land with tight, greedy fists. Someday, the realtor had confided to Walt, people from all over the state would be moving here in droves, sucking up every square inch of this land for their respective retirement villas. A good deal of money was going to be made. Walt narrowed his eyes and peered into the dense woods beyond the edge of his property, trying to imagine old people in bright colored clothes laying down Astroturf on their backyards and yelling at the mailman. The thought elicited a chuckle.

When he got up from the steps to dump the remaining ice cubes in the grass, Walt heard a soft panoply of desperate mewling. He padded across his dry, overgrown lawn and gazed into the woods. There, on a sunlit patch of dead leaves and twigs, Walt saw a black cat on her side with five anxious kittens struggling at her teats. He brought his brows together and smiled awkwardly at the tableau, wondering if these animals belonged to anyone or not. Clicking his tongue against

the roof of his mouth, he walked back to the porch and went inside.

In the afternoon, Walt situated a step ladder directly beneath the ceiling stain and climbed up with a bleach-soaked scrub brush in his hand. He scrubbed at the spot until his arm started to feel sore, then he switched hands and scrubbed some more until that arm got sore, too. The bristles on the brush had turned dark brown, but the stain itself did not appear to have changed at all. Walt knitted his brow at it and stepped back down to the floor. More serious measures were necessary here, but it was just going to have to wait. Walt needed to get ready for dinner with Amanda.

Walt and Amanda's first date, two and half years ago, was at a small Cajun restaurant on Markham called Louisiana Joe's. The place had since changed hands, and now a slightly fancier dining spot took its place. The new joint was called Maggie's, and that was where Walt met Amanda just after sunset.

He had asked her to go ahead and get a table, but she was seated on the long polyurethane divan in the waiting area when he arrived. Her curly brown hair was done up with only a few wild spirals cascading down the back of her neck and framing her freckled elfin face. She wore a dark blue dress Walt had never seen before; it looked elegant and it flowed down her small frame like a waterfall. He felt underdressed when he saw her,

strangely self-conscious for a man nearly ready to propose. But Amanda just did that to him—she made him feel like he did not deserve her, like he won the lottery every day for almost three years straight. She smiled sweetly when he came into the restaurant. He returned the smile and accepted a peck on his cheek.

“It’s changed a bit, hasn’t it?” she said.

“A bit,” Walt agreed.

“What do you suppose it’ll be like in another three years?”

“Too rich for me, I’m sure.”

“Don’t be cheap, dear.”

“You haven’t seen the house yet. It’s going to cost me a bundle before I’m done. Hope you like ramen.”

“Love it.”

“Then I do believe everything’s going to be all right.”

Amanda giggled, effectively ruining the playacting but Walt did not mind. On a list of things that made life worth living, Amanda’s unique and infectious giggle was easily in the top five.

In a moment, a college-aged kid in a starched white shirt collected a pair of menus and led them to a small, round table in the middle of the restaurant. They ordered mid-priced wine, white asparagus in sabayon sauce, and then they each had *Fillet de Poisson*. They ate and talked and laughed a little too loud, judging by the looks some of their fellow diners occasionally shot at them. When they finished eating, Walt paid the check

and they walked hand-in-hand out to the parking lot where Amanda lit up a cigarette. Walt frowned.

“Just give me until New Year’s,” she said between drags. “It’s a psychological thing, I think. Quitting on New Year’s, I mean.”

“You said that last year, as I recall,” Walt complained.

“And I may say it again next year, but you can’t say I’m not trying.”

Walt screwed up his mouth and sighed. He hated that Amanda smoked, but she smoked when they met and he felt more than a little uncomfortable trying to change her. He only wanted her to be healthy. He also wanted to never smell that stale cigarette smell in his bed ever again. Still, he was loathe to ruin the mood of an otherwise terrific evening, so he let it go. Recognizing this, Amanda smiled and gave his hand a squeeze.

“Let’s have a look at that house,” she said softly.

“Oh, not yet,” Walt protested. “It’s a shambles, really. I want to get the place fixed up before you see it.”

“You were a shambles the first time I saw you and that turned out all right.”

“Funny.”

“Come on. It’s a hot night, and I just can’t see sweating through the night for no good reason.”

“You’d rather be sweating for a good reason,” he inferred.

“You got that right, pal.”

Walt felt a shiver rock his body. He had not expected the evening to end like this, but now that

events were turning that way he could not object. Amanda gave a coy grin and planted a lingering kiss on Walt's lips.

"I'll follow you in my car," she whispered.

Amanda wandered the house while Walt made coffee. He listened to her heels click-clacking on the hardwood floors. He liked the sound. He hoped to hear a great deal more of it.

"You did this baseboarding yourself?" she called out from the dining room.

"Sure," Walt called back as the coffee maker started to drip. "I'm a regular Bob Vila."

Amanda laughed. "That so?"

"I am a man of many talents. I've even made coffee all by myself."

She click-clacked her way into the kitchen.

"I'm speechless," she said. "How did I ever get so lucky?"

"You must have been a saint in a previous life."

"I must have been twenty saints," she said, leaning into Walt for a deep kiss. Then she gave a soft moan and said, "Make that a hundred."

"I hope it's paying off."

"In spades," Amanda said.

Walt regretfully released himself from her grip and collected two mugs from the cupboard. As he did so, Amanda reached into an open box on the counter and

pulled out two dusty wine glasses, both of them stuffed with tissue paper.

“Got any wine?”

“I just made coffee.”

Amanda gave a crooked smile and arched one eyebrow. Walt smiled back, melting inside.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’ve got a bottle of brunello. Will that work?”

Amanda thrust the glasses at Walt and said, “Fill ‘er up.”

After Walt rinsed the glasses and poured the wine, they took their glasses and wandered hand in hand to the dining room. They sat among the piles and stacks of books while Amanda sipped at the crimson fluid and Walt watched her adoringly.

“Have you read all of these?” Amanda asked as she grabbed a random book from the nearest stack. It was *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

“No, not all. My reading list is miles long. I buy them faster than I can read them, I’m afraid.”

“This one?”

“Sure. I’ve read all of Dickens. Until some mysterious, heretofore unknown manuscript appears, anyway.”

“Any good?”

“My dear,” Walt said, putting on a condescending, professorial tone. “There is no such beast as sub par Dickens.”

Amanda set the book down on the hardwood floor and turned her narrowed eyes back to the stack.

"Hmm," she said, searching.

She then reached for another volume, settling on a dogeared copy of *Tom Jones* as she tipped her glass and dumped its contents all over *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

"Uh-oh," Walt said as he leaned forward to take Amanda's glass.

She looked down at the fruits of her clumsiness and yelped.

"Oh, shit."

"You've stained my Chuzzlewit."

"Oh, shit," she said again.

"And that's not even a euphemism."

"I can't believe it. I'm such an idiot!"

"Not at all," Walt assured her. He gently took the volume and held it up between forefinger and thumb. Red wine dripped from the leaves like blood from a wound.

"Oh, man," Amanda moaned. "Good news is, your lady just so happens to own a bookstore."

"Don't worry about it..."

"Shut it. I'm ordering a brand spanking new copy first thing tomorrow. I'll even be sure to get some super academic notated edition, better than this poor mess."

"For God's sake, don't do that."

"Why not? I've got a distributor's discount."

"Print's too small."

Amanda laughed.

“You’re shitting me.”

“Have you ever tried reading one of those things? You’d go cross-eyed!”

“All right, then I’ll order a large print edition. And a magnifying glass.”

Walt smirked.

“You’re a dear girl,” he said in a shaky, ancient voice.

“How about some butterscotch candy, too? Would grandpa like that?”

“I’d like some of *your* candy, my dear!”

Walt tucked his lips over his teeth and smacked them in a parody of an elderly letch.

“You dirty old man,” Amanda purred.

She then laid a hand over his and kissed his neck.

“Grandpa likes,” Walt whispered. Amanda giggled.

“Chuzzlewit can wait,” she cooed.

“Yes,” Walt agreed. “I suppose it can.”

He gently set the cups on the counter and let Amanda lead him by the hand toward the bedroom.

They made love fast and furiously. It only lasted ten minutes, but they climaxed simultaneously. Afterward, Walt and Amanda lay side by side on the unraised mattress, breathing hard and fast in harmonic union. When her breath began to slow down to a normal rhythm, Amanda rolled onto her side and said, “Now, how about that coffee?”

Walt took his black, Amanda added loads of milk and sugar. Cups in hand and dressed only in bathrobes, they retired to the front porch. They sipped at their coffee and Amanda chain-smoked, but Walt did not say a word about it. Instead, he waxed philosophic about the impressionable young minds he hoped to mold in the coming years, wondering out loud how many kids per year he might be able to turn onto Dickens or Conrad or even—fingers crossed—Emily Dickinson. In the long run, he hoped to include some of the macabre writers like Poe and Blackwood, but Walt had no intention to press his luck the first year in. The tight-assed parents in the PTA could get a little touchy about that sort of thing, so he aimed at ingratiating himself to them first. Amanda absently commented that it sounded like a good plan.

They turned in a little after one in the morning. Walt slept six hours and might have slept a little longer still had the racket in the hallway not woken him. He cracked open his bleary eyes and struggled to focus until he eventually made out the shape of Amanda standing on the stepstool.

“What’re you doin?” he slurred.

“Putting shellac on this stain. Ought to seal it up. Then you can paint over it.”

“Oh,” Walt said.

“But don’t let it go. If there’s a leaky pipe or something, this is only going to be a stopgap solution.”

“Yes, dear.”

“I might put a stain sealer on it, too. So it doesn’t show through the paint.”

“That stuff smells awful.”

“How do you think I like it up here? You’re ten feet away from it.”

“If you were a hundred saints,” Walt said, sitting up, “then I was a thousand.”

“There,” Amanda said as she descended the three steps back to the floor. “Give a couple hours and then put on the sealant if you’ve got some. I’ll paint it for you tonight, if you want. Got to go to work now, though.”

“All right, but don’t wear yourself out.”

Amanda pulled her jacket over her shoulders and arched an eyebrow.

“Why? You got some strenuous activities planned?”

“Yeah—I need you to patch my roof, too.”

Amanda stuck out her tongue and blew a raspberry at Walt. He returned the gesture in kind and then Amanda click-clacked across the house and out the front door. Walt lay back on the mattress and grinned with total satisfaction while he listened to Amanda’s car rattle to life and then pull away from the house. And, a few minutes later, he was asleep again; dead to the world.

Chapter Three

Walt awoke to a rhythmic noise, persistent and loud. He scrunched up his face and glanced at his watch. It was noon. Planting his hands on the mattress, he hoisted himself up and listened closely. It was a sort of dripping sound. Drip, drip, drip. Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes with the balls of his fists, Walt peered into the hall and saw the source of the irritating noise.

The stain on the ceiling had spread, and now it was dripping down to the hardwood floor below, forming a small, reddish-brown puddle.

“Damn it,” Walt groaned.

He got out of bed, stepped into a pair of gray sweatpants, and staggered to the doorway to peer up at the stain. The shellac held, but the relentless stain had simply spread out around it, forming a rusty doughnut on the ceiling. Whatever the source of the leak, the shellac was not going to solve the problem. Walt let out a frustrated grunt and padded out into the hall, careful to avoid stepping in the puddle on the floor. His sleep-addled mind ran through a chronological list of duties, starting with making and drinking at least half a pot of coffee. After that, he silently admitted to himself with a heavy sigh, he would have to call a plumber.

So much for do it yourself.

* * *

The plumber—a bone thin man of about sixty with hair in his ears—clambered up the ladder to the attic and called down for Walt to hand up his toolbox. Walt followed, curious to see what the old guy would find. In the end, after the floor was torn out and the paneling and ceiling joist were exposed, no obvious leaking was found. The old plumber sat back on the rafters and scratched his head.

“Now that’s odd,” he said.

“What’s odd about it?” Walt asked.

“No pipes here. None at all. Drywall’s fine. Sturdy, intact. Blocking’s fine, too. Nothing on any side leaked at all. But look here.”

The plumber leaned over the hole in the attic floor, pointing his flashlight down at the paneling. In the center of the knotty wood panel, between the joists and the squared off blocking beams, there was a faint brown spot.

“Ain’t that about the strangest thing I ever saw,” the plumber remarked.

“What is it?”

“It’s your stain, is what it is. ‘Cept this is pushing through from the other side, instead of the other way ‘round. Like if your house was upside-down.”

“Upside-down,” Walt dumbly repeated.

“Search me,” the plumber went on. “All’s I can tell you is maybe somebody’s playing tricks on you. Having a bit of fun.”

“Fun,” Walt mumbled. “Sure.”

“If I was you, I’d just clean up my ceiling, paint it over, and watch who I let in my house.”

Walt smiled and thanked the old guy for his advice. He purposefully neglected to inform the plumber that the only person he had ever let in the house was Amanda. And that was after he first noticed the stain.

Nevertheless, Walt slapped a twenty dollar bill in the plumber’s palm, despite the gray old man’s protest that he hadn’t really done anything, and set to painting the rust-colored circle on the hallway ceiling. It was the work of five minutes and when it was done Walt gazed up at the newly white area and smiled. Walt then retreated into his bedroom where he began undressing for a shower. Once he was completely naked, the doorbell jangled.

“Christ,” he grumbled, pulling the sweatpants back up and simultaneously reaching for his ratty old REO Speedwagon tee shirt.

He shuffled across the house, bisecting the shafts of sunlight that knifed in from the windows. Walt then opened the front door, stared at the impatient looking man on his front porch for a moment, and inwardly cursed himself for having forgotten all about the roofer.

“You been having a go at it yourself?” the roofer asked upon seeing the attic steps still pulled down to the floor.

“No, I just had a plumber in.”

The roofer raised his eyebrows.

“It’s a fixer-upper,” Walt said.

“I’m gonna have a look. Might take a little while to assess your situation.”

Walt nodded and informed the man that he was going to take a shower. He felt a little weird saying it, worried that the roofer might misconstrue that little tidbit of information as a creepy sort of come-on, but if he did he failed to show it. So the roofer set to roofing, and Walt vanished into the bathroom. He ran a near-scalding hot shower, stood under it until his skin turned red, and then toweled off in the steam-filled room. No one had ever installed a ventilation fan in there, which would inevitably lead to mold or worse. Then again, Walt thought, he could always take the time to wipe down the mirror and walls after a shower and save himself the time and cost. Slipping into his terrycloth bathrobe, he resolved to worry about it later. Much later. *One thing at a time*, he reminded himself.

He could hear the roofer moving around in the attic, stepping on creaking rafters and talking to himself. Walt glanced up at the ceiling then, and a gasp got caught in his throat.

The stain had bled through both the shellac and the paint. It was bigger than ever, now spread out over an area of ceiling at least a foot in radius. And it was dripping all over Walt’s bathrobe.

Walt dabbed at a thick red droplet on his should with the pad of his finger. He smelled it. It was vaguely metallic; rusty, just as he suspected.

“What the hell?”

Presently the roofer stamped down the ladder steps from the attic above, his tool belt jangling against his hips.

“Good news is I can do the job,” he said before stepping off the ladder. “But it won’t be cheap.”

“Do it,” Walt said as he wiped his finger on the front of his robe. “I can’t stand the leaks anymore.”

Amanda gazed up at the stain with equal measures of wonder and disgust. Walt had long since wiped both ceiling and floor with a dirty rag, but the stain went on dripping still. Now there was a plastic bucket on the floor, directly beneath the stain, catching every splashing drop.

“And there’s no leaks?”

“Not up there, there isn’t.”

“Then what’s between the drywall and the paneling?”

“Nothing. They’re pressed right up against each other.”

“Have you looked? I mean, have you actually pried them apart?”

“That would tear up the ceiling. And then I’d have to pay someone else to fix something else.”

“Yeah, but if it’s between that and the stain that never dies...”

Walt let out a discontented breath and sagged his shoulders.

Amanda said, “This is why I rent.”

“Hand me that flashlight,” Walt said as he started to climb the fold-down ladder.

“Are you going up there right now?”

“No time like the present.”

“But it’s past ten at night!”

“It’s driving me crazy. Seriously. Flashlight?”

Amanda crooked her mouth to one side and passed the flashlight up to him. A second later, he disappeared into the attic.

For reasons unclear to her, Amanda began feeling nervous as soon as Walt was out of view. She did not believe any harm could possibly come to him up there, but something about the weird stain unnerved her. On the one hand, she hoped Walt determined its cause right away, so that it would be over and done with and they could both move onto more imperative issues. On the other hand, however, she could almost feel a desperate cry building up in her chest, bellowing out to insist he come back down right this instant. Instead, she just stood there, gazing up at the dark square in the ceiling into which Walt had vanished. Then, after a minute or two, there was creaking and scraping, following by a grunt and a loud crack.

“Walt? Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Walt called down. “Just ruining my new house is all.”

Amanda furrowed her brow, unaware of the way she was anxiously bouncing on her heels. Another loud crack sounded from above, startling her. She jumped

back, staring at the ceiling as the narrow fissure formed from one end of the dripping stain to the other. Flecks of paints and fiberglass floated down between fat, red drops.

Then Walt screamed.

Amanda sucked in a lungful of air and scampered up the steps into the attic. Launching herself up onto the rafters, she peered through the darkness at the lone glow of Walt's flashlight across the attic from where she crouched.

"Walt? Walt!"

"I'm fine," he groaned. "I was just...Jesus, I feel dumb."

"What is it?"

"Don't come over here!" Walt yelled. "It's too dark, you might lose your footing and fall right through the ceiling."

"What made you cry out like that?"

"Some kind of animal. A rat, probably. I don't know how it got in between here, but man is it a mess."

Disregarding Walt's concern for her safety, Amanda reached a foot out in the darkness and felt her way from one rafter to the next, gradually traversing the attic toward him. He grunted disapprovingly at her when she reached him, but shone the light on the spot in question all the same.

"Look."

On the flaky drywall that lay on the other side of the paneling Walt had torn up was a sticky red mass of

bloody flesh. Amanda gagged first at the sight of it, and then at its fetid odor. Strands of black hair were matted into the fleshy pulp, but other than that it resembled no living creature at all.

“Whatever it is...*was*...it got crushed between the ceiling and the paneling up here. For the life of me I can’t see how, but you can see it as well as me...”

“Jesus,” Amanda croaked.

“I reckon it was a lot bigger than this, on account of all the blood that seeped through. Probably ants or cockroaches...”

“Stop,” Amanda interjected. “Just stop.”

Fighting back the bilious threat of vomit at the back of her throat, she scrabbled back over the rafters, found the opening in the floor, and hurried down the ladder. Walt just shook his head and whipped his tee shirt off, with which he scraped the bloody mess up with one side and gave it a cursory wipe down with the other. He felt enormously relieved—not only had he finally pinpointed the origin of his stain trouble, he also managed to avoid doing too much damage to the ceiling. There was some, to be sure, but nothing he couldn’t fix himself in the span of an afternoon.

That much, Walt decided, could wait.

So, his wadded up tee shirt in tow, he descended the steps, pushed the folding ladder back up into the attic, and grinned triumphantly at Amanda.

“Aren’t you proud of yourself,” she said.

The comment was not without an edge.

“I most definitely am,” Walt said, beaming.

He strode off toward the back door in order to dump the wasted shirt in the outside garbage.

Halfway out the door, he turned back and shouted into the house, “This is why I own!”

Amanda went home that night. There was no argument, no fussing. She merely yawned and stretched like a cat before declaring how tired she was. Then she left. There had been no understanding between them that she would have stayed, implicit or otherwise, but Walt felt vaguely sad about it all the same. It was not a particularly big house, but it was, Walt thought, too big for just him. Accordingly, and in light of the awkward experience through which he had just suffered, a terrible loneliness was beginning to weigh down on him. His logical side understood that everything was going to be okay, but this was not sufficiently communicated to his irrational, emotional side. And the more he thought about it, the more he obsessed over it, the emptier he felt inside.

Walt cleaned up the wet, gory mess on the ceiling one more time, tossed the rag into the bucket and left the bucket outside the back door. The roofer was supposed to return in the morning, so while he did his thing, Walt figured on finishing up the baseboards before turning his attention to the walls. While planning thus, he wandered into the kitchen to pour a glass of water from

the tap. Halfway into the kitchen he observed a fat black cockroach skitter across the tiles and halt a few inches from his left foot. Walt sneered at the shiny insect. He then lifted his leg and crushed the cockroach under the ball of his foot, spattering the tiles with the insect's yellow guts.

Walt wiped the bottom of his foot against the right leg of his sweatpants, shed the pants on the floor and went to bed. He forgot entirely about the water.

Chapter Four

Walt awoke in a cold sweat. If he had a nightmare, he could not remember it. It was still dark, which elicited a grouchy curse from him.

“Shit.”

He glanced at his watch, which was supposed to glow in the dark, but it was far too dim for him to determine the positions of the hands. He resolved to get up and go into the kitchen to have a look at the digital clock on the stove when the door knocker fell against the front door in a rapid, almost desperate pattern. Walt frowned. He could not have gotten more than a couple hours’ sleep and now someone was pounding on his door in the middle of the night. He continued into the kitchen; he still wanted to know the time so that he could throw it in the face of whoever was out there slamming the door knocker as if their life depended on it.

He peered at the clock, squinting through the hazy blur of his sleep deprived vision. The clock read 7:25.

That did not make sense. At half past seven in the morning, in the middle of summer, it was never still dark. The clock had to be wrong. Either that, or it was almost seven thirty at night. Which would mean...

The incessant pounding kept on.

“All right, all right!” Walt roared.

He stamped across the house, twisted the deadbolt and threw the door open to reveal Amanda standing on the front porch.

“Amanda?”

“Were you asleep?” she asked innocently.

“Of course I was asleep. It’s barely past seven and I never get up until eight when I’m off. You know that.”

“Walt, it’s seven-thirty PM. Have you been asleep since last night?”

“Have I...?”

Walt scrunched up his face and pondered hard on that deceptively simple question. Had he been asleep for the better part of eighteen hours? It was possible, but he could not see why it should be the case. Still, he could not remember anything past going to bed after the adventure with that damned stain. And the cockroach; he remembered that, too. Now Walt hoped that he slept almost an entire day. Otherwise, he had lost a day he should have remembered.

Amanda gently placed her hand on Walt’s chest and smiled weakly.

“Can I come in?”

“Sure,” he said almost too quietly to hear.

His throat hurt. It was scratchy and dry. He turned back for the kitchen, intent on getting a glass of water before anything else. Amanda followed him in and shut the door behind her.

“You don’t sound one hundred percent,” she said. “You don’t look it, either.”

Walt filled a glass from the tap and swallowed all of it without taking a breath. Then he exhaled loudly and said, “I feel about twenty percent right now.”

“Should I put some coffee on?”

Walt said nothing, concentrating only on refilling his glass. Amanda sighed and got to work on the coffee maker, filling a filter with grounds and waiting for Walt to finish with the faucet so she could fill the carafe. Once the machine got to gurgling and dripping into the pot, she leaned up against the counter and looked lovingly at Walt. He had streams of drool-infused water running down his chin and chest. His face was prickly with stubble and his hair a tussled, greasy mess. She had never seen him in such a state, although probably only because they had not yet chosen to live together. After they did, she inwardly mused, she supposed they would see a lot of one another’s down and dirty humanity. Still, Walt looked like hell. She could not deny that much. So she reached out to set the back of her hand on his forehead to see if he had a temperature. Walt jumped and moved back, spilling more water all over himself and the floor.

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” she said with a sheepish smile.

“It...it’s okay,” he stammered in reply. “Maybe I’m a little under the weather. I’m going to lie down on the sofa.”

“Sounds like a good idea.”

Wiping off his face with the sleeve of his bathrobe, Walt stumbled out to the living room and collapsed onto the sofa. Within seconds, he was lightly snoring.

Amanda stayed and watched him sleep.

* * *

An hour into Walt's second consecutive slumber, Amanda polished off the coffee she made and went into the dining room where his belongings remained packed up in stacks of boxes. One stray box on the floor was labeled *Books*, and she decided to open that one up. Feeling a little bit like a kid at Christmas, Amanda commenced taking the books out of the box one at a time, examining each of them closely and looking for one that might be good to read until Walt woke up again. She found Hawthorne and Cooper, Waugh and Dickens and the ubiquitous collections of Emily Dickinson. There were also dusty volumes of Wells and Verne in there, and a dozen paperback novels by Philip K. Dick. She found books on religion, books on atheism, and an art book filled with macabre erotica she would never have expected to find among Walt's belongings. She wrinkled her nose at that one as she set it on the floor. Finally, near the bottom of the box, Amanda extracted a thin volume of Lord Dunsany stories that promised weird tales of forgotten gods and elves and ghosts. Satisfied, she returned the rest of the books to the box and went back to chair by the couch on which Walt was so deeply sleeping.

For a while Amanda was content with silently reading and intermittently sipping her coffee. After a while, when the coffee had run its course, she got up to use the bathroom. Walt was still quietly snoring, having

not moved a centimeter from his original position. She was worried for him, but she smiled and kissed him lightly on the forehead. He slept on, and she padded off to the bathroom.

Groping blindly in the darkness, Amanda eventually found a switch in the hallway and flipped it. The bright bulb in the fixture above her flared on, forcing her to narrow her eyes. Then, as she became accustomed to the light, Amanda gaped at the ceiling, a few feet away from the light fixture.

“God,” she whispered to herself.

Walt had not bothered to clean that horrible stain up at all. Worse, Amanda thought she would be damned if it had not gotten bigger.

Walt slept through the rest of the night and woke up just before six in the morning. Discounting the few minutes of wakefulness at seven-thirty, he had managed to sleep almost twenty-nine hours straight. He was a firecracker, too. When Amanda awoke on the uncomfortable chair beside the sofa, it was to the sound of measured scratching; Walt had already removed most of the wallpaper in the house and was well on his way to repairing every hole, dent, crack and scratch. She rubbed her eyes and yawned loudly before shakily rising to her feet.

“How long you been up?” she mumbled.

“A few hours. Got a lot of work done.”

“Well, that’s good.”

She yawned again and dipped a hand into her purse. Coming back with a crumpled pack of cigarettes, she awkwardly blew an unnoticed kiss to Walt and staggered out to the front porch for a smoke. In front of the house the back door of Walt’s hatchback hung open, and Amanda could see the piles of supplies inside. Shingles and lumber and baseboards, boxes of nails and can after can of white paint. She thought white was a bit unimaginative, but it was his house. He could paint it black if he liked.

She smoked the cigarette down to the filter, stubbed it out on the front lawn, and carried it back into the house to throw away. Her mouth felt fuzzy and tasted awful, so after she deposited the spent butt in the kitchen trash, she made a beeline for the bathroom.

There, she noticed the dripping stain on the ceiling, and the sticky puddle on the floor.

“Oh, Walt.”

“What?” he called out from the dining room.

“You still haven’t taken care of this nasty mess,” she shouted back.

“What mess?”

“The....*blood*. On the ceiling.”

“Oh, that? Of course I did. Cleaned that up last night. Or, no—the night before last. I keep forgetting I was in a coma there for a while.”

He let out a weak laugh.

“Well it’s still here, Walt. And it’s all over the floor.”

Without waiting for a reply, she stepped over the noxious puddle and into the bathroom. Walt said something, but she could not make it out. She might have asked him to repeat himself, but she opted to shut the door and turn the faucet on, instead. That stain was getting to be a thorn in her paw. Who could just let something like that go? It was absolutely revolting, and worse that that it was unsanitary. There was no telling what manner of vermin had gotten crushed to death up in the attic, nor what dreadful diseases it may have been carrying. She was tempted to clean it up herself, but some primordial maternal instinct kicked in that reproved her for such a thought. No, she mustn't clean it up. If she did, what would Walt learn?

Besides, it was his house. He could crap on the floor if it suited him. She just would not want anything to do with him if he did. So what did Amanda want with a guy who left animal blood all over the place? She sneered as she squeezed a dollop of toothpaste out onto Walt's toothbrush. At least the man took great care of his teeth, she thought.

When she reemerged from the bathroom, Amanda found Walt on all fours, cleaning up the floor with yet another dirty dishrag. He glanced up at her with wide, puppy-dog eyes and smiled like a kid caught stealing a cookie.

"I swear to god I thought I'd cleaned this up," he said.

"Maybe you dreamed it."

"I guess so. I'm sorry."

He sounded sincere, which was enough to make Amanda feel downright terrible. Minutes ago she was reconsidering the welfare of their relationship, and over what? A misunderstanding, that was all. She felt like an utter bitch, and she told Walt so.

“Baloney,” Walt said. “It’s just crazy around here, is all. New house, new job coming up. It’s all mine, but really, what’s mine is yours. Right?”

“Right,” Amanda said with tears welling up in her eyes. “Fucking A, that’s right.”

She guided Walt up by his armpits and planted a hard kiss on his mouth. Walt kissed her back with just as much force and substance, which went a long way toward making Amanda feel better about the whole thing. When they released one another, Walt wiped a tear off her cheek with his finger and smiled.

“What do you want for lunch?” he asked happily.

With the mess cleaned up and most of the more visible interior repairs done, Walt and Amanda decided to call it a day. They showered together, made love, and ate turkey sandwiches on the floor of the dining room while they opened up boxes. The vast preponderance of Walt’s belongings consisted of books, hundreds and hundreds of them, for which he had next to no storage space.

“I’m getting you bookshelves for Christmas,” Amanda remarked upon seeing the overwhelming number of volumes coming out of the boxes.

“Great,” Walt said. “I’ll need something like twenty of them.”

He smiled surreptitiously then, thinking about what he had already gotten for her: three princess-cut diamonds, one and half carats in total, set in a fourteen carat white gold band. The ring cost more than three grand, and Walt was nowhere near paying it off yet, but he figured it would pay him back in spades. Amanda was worth it. She was worth more, even. Much, much more.

“What are you grinning about?”

He shook off the reverie and shot a coy look at her.

“Damn good turkey sandwich,” he said.

In the late afternoon, Walt’s new dining room was no longer stacked to the ceiling with boxes—it was stacked to the ceiling with books. The rest of the boxes, no more than twelve in total, contained a few pots and pans, sundry knick-knacks he was happy to keep boxed up, and the record collection he never listened to. All of these could wait. Walt and Amanda assembled the frame for the bed, smoothed out the bed sheets, and then collectively collapsed on top of it all with a united sigh. For a while, Walt remained still, listening to the rhythm of Amanda’s breathing. Before he knew it, he was drifting toward that clumsy, watery place between sleep and consciousness.

Amanda shrieked.

Jolted, Walt shot up and searched for her. She was in the hallway, pressed up against the wall with her hands splayed out like claws.

“What happened?” Walt blurted.

“Goddamnit it’s all over me!” she cried.

Walt threw his legs over the side of the bed and hurried over to her. He stopped just shy of the red, viscous puddle on the floor between them. His face twisted in disgust, and when he dragged his eyes from the mess on the floor up to Amanda, he saw that her white tee shirt was splattered with sanguine splotches. Worse, it had gotten in her hair and dripped down onto her face. Walt was dumbstruck. He looked from her to the floor, back to her, and then up at the ceiling. Sure enough, the stain had returned. There was no trace of the shellac or the paint he had slathered up there. There was only the nebulous reddish-brown patch on the ceiling, dripping down like a leaky faucet.

“What in hell?”

Amanda was trembling, her eyes wide and mouth hanging open.

“It’s blood....Walt, it’s blood...”

Walt seized her by the shoulders and guided her around the puddle into the bathroom. “Come on,” he whispered, “come on.”

“Blood,” Amanda repeated.

In the bathroom, he gently stripped her down, tugging her shirt up over her head like she was a toddler at bath time. Once she was naked, he twisted the cold steel handle in the tub all the way to HOT and plugged the drain. Amanda lowered herself down onto the toilet seat, patiently and quietly waiting for her bath. While

the hot water surged noisily out of the faucet, Walt returned to the hallway and stared at the bloody mess on both ceiling and floor. He was absolutely certain that he removed every bit of the animal's remains from the attic, which left nothing to bleed out all over the place like this. Unless, he realized, something *else* had gone and died up there.

Walt groaned.

He waited for the tub to fill, and when it did he tested the water. It was hot, but not so much that Amanda would balk. He took her by the hand, led her to the tub, and she stepped in. Once she was sliding down into the bath, Walt kissed her on the top of the head.

"I'm going to look in the attic," he said.

"The attic? What for?"

"To see what the damn problem is now."

Amanda pouted. But Walt went out and yanked the dangling rope for the attic's ladder, anyway. It jerked and shuttled out, clacking all the way down to the floor. A hot burst of musty air blasted Walt from above. He exhaled loudly and began the climb up.

He was already perched on the first pair of rafters outside of the opening when it occurred to him that he forgot the flashlight.

"Shit," he grumbled.

Walt paused, considering the necessity of climbing back down and searching for it. In the short time he had the house he'd already spent an inordinate amount of time in the attic. Accordingly, Walt felt secure that he

knew it backward and forward, even in the dark. It would be no problem getting over to the spot above the hallway; the only real concern left was what he found when he got there. But that was not truly an issue for Walt. All he expected to find was another dead animal, a rat or a pigeon. Maybe a bat. Whatever the case, he would not need the flashlight for that. In fact, it might even be better without one—he would not have to look at the poor, bloody thing.

Walt set forth, carefully taking the creaking rafters one at a time. Sweat began beading at his hairline, developing into fat, salty droplets that spilled down his face. The summer had been bad enough without spending so much time in an unventilated hotbox like the attic. Walt was positively baking.

He knew he reached the spot when the insulation receded and the terrain under his feet turned to broken paneling. Walt paused to catch his breath and wiped his dripping face on his sleeve. The odor slammed his senses all at once. It was a warm, putrid smell, like bad hamburger meat left out in the sun. Whatever it was, it had to have been dead a long time to smell that bad.

Which, Walt fully realized, was impossible. Only a couple of days had passed since he cleaned up the last one, that unidentifiable mass of blood and sinew. For something else to crawl up there, die, and then rot enough to stink this badly would take a lot longer than two days or so. Walt buried his nose and mouth in the crook of his elbow and pondered his next move. He

planned on getting rid of whatever it was, but he now understood this to be a temporary solution. There was a larger problem than he previously saw, likely some manner of infestation. A deep growl rumbled in the back of Walt's throat; this house was getting to be more trouble than it was worth.

Amanda called up from below. It sounded like she was at the foot of the ladder. Walt ignored her. He had a more pressing concern at hand.

Bouncing on the balls of his feet, Walt reached out to the source of the fetid stench and sank his fingertips into something warm and wet. He gagged, fighting back the retching impulse triggered by the unanticipated contact. He wanted nothing more than to retract his hands, to get away from that awful odor, but instead he dug in deeper and tried to scoop up the soft, moist mass. It did not give. To Walt, it seemed to be stuck to the panel. He pulled his hands back and frowned. A spackle knife would have been a welcomed tool just then, but Walt did not think he even owned one. Something else for his damned home improvement list.

He ground his jaws together and plunged his hands back into the mass, determined to dig it all up and get rid of it once and for all. This time, when Walt sank his fingers into the sticky substance, he felt it tighten around his digits. He let out a yelp and yanked his hands back again, but the mass on the panel would not relent. It held him tight, contracting like a baby boa until it hurt. Amanda called up again, yelling Walt's name. She was a

little closer now, probably climbing the ladder. In the moment he was distracted by her, the warm thing on the broken panel released him. Relieved, Walt stumbled backwards and nearly fell between two rafters. He steadied himself in time, twisting into a spidery position to keep from falling through the ceiling.

In the soft yellow glow of the attic's opening, Amanda's head popped into view. Her shiny wet hair lay flat on her head, framing the pale face that searched the darkness for some sign of Walt.

"Don't come up here!" Walt shouted from across the pitch black attic.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he answered quickly. "It's just dark. It's dangerous."

"Are you done yet?"

Walt wiggled his fingers and marveled at the hot, tingly sensation he felt. He then heard a slick, slithery noise beside him—the bloody lump on the panel, shifting and moving. A shudder worked its way up his spine.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm done for now."

Walt quickly scampered over the rafters to the ladder and almost knocked Amanda down in his rush to get back down to the cooler floor below.

"What was it?" Amanda breathlessly asked.

"Another dead animal. Rat, I guess."

Amanda wrinkled her nose.

“I guess I’ve got a nest of them up there,” Walt continued.

“Nasty,” Amanda muttered.

“I’ll take care of it,” he snarled.

Walt stalked back into the bedroom, walking right through the puddle on the floor and leaving red footprints between the hall and the bed.

Chapter Five

Amanda slept on the couch, or at least she tried to. Not five minutes after she shut her eyes she began to hear scratching and skittering coming from the ceiling. From the attic. It seemed to her that Walt was right: there were rats up there. And where there was one rat, there were fifty rats. She tried to block out the noise, but it was useless. Every time her mind let go and she started to drift off, Amanda imagined the ceiling opening up and a torrent of screeching, clawing rats pouring down on her.

With a heavy sigh, Amanda sat up and switched the lamp on. She was exhausted but unable to sleep, a terrible dilemma she knew too well. So she merely sat there for some time, glassily staring at the wall and breathing the stale air that seemed as old as the house. The skittering continued unabated. Amanda knitted her brow, fighting back the anxiety that was tightening in her chest. Things between her and Walt had been strained, to say the least. There had always been minor arguments and disagreements, bad moods and the inevitable apologies that followed. But ever since he bought this damn house...

A cockroach scrambled up the wall in front of her. Amanda narrowed her eyes at it, feeling an odd sort of hate for the insect, as though she was channeling all of the anger and disquiet of the last several days and firing it like a laser at the roach. It made it halfway up the

wall, turned, and then scabbled horizontally across the length of the room. Amanda launched herself to her feet and gave chase. Even if she consciously recognized the absurdity of her sheer hatred for the insignificant bug, she aimed to kill it all the same.

At the end of the wall, a six inch molding juttet out to separate the living room from the dining room. The cockroach crawled up and over the molding without slowing its pace and kept on across the dining room wall. Amanda scooped up one her flats and hurried after it. Now the roach climbed up before turning away again, skirting the edge of the ceiling in its desperate scrambling escape. Amanda leapt up and smacked at it with the shoe, but she missed.

“Bastard!” she hissed.

For a second she lost sight of it, but the black blur in her peripheral vision sent her reeling back after it. The roach tried to climb down and under the molding toward the kitchen, teetered for a moment on just two of its spiny legs, and then dropped to the floor with a quiet click. Amanda lunged for it, but the cockroach hit the ground running and skittered across the tiles toward the hallway beyond. The shoe slammed against a tile long after the roach had run off.

In the hall Amanda flicked the light switch on, bathing the white walls with a sickly yellow light. The cockroach quickened its pace, frantic to evade the light, and climbed upward in a zigzag pattern toward the ceiling. Amanda stopped short of lunging again;

between her and the roach on the wall lay the widening red puddle on the floor. Her eyes remained fixed to the rapid creature, though. Up it went, its six tiny legs clicking noisily against the textured wall. It reached the corner where two walls and the ceiling met and momentarily paused as if it were reviewing its options. Then a thin crimson strand shot out from the dripping spot on the ceiling, seized the cockroach and pulled it back into the stain.

The insect struggled, wriggling spasmodically, but it could not break free. In an instant, the viscous blood enveloped the cockroach completely. Amanda heard a faint crunching sound, and it was done.

Dazed, Amanda stared at the widening stain for several minutes while she tried to process what she had just seen. Contemplation, however, did her no good. She had no point of reference, no way to understand what just happened or how it was possible. If pressed, Amanda could explain that a leaking blood stain *reached out* and *ate* a cockroach before her eyes. But that clearly made no sense at all.

“Honey?”

Amanda jumped. In the shadows of the bedroom, just beyond the scope of the hallway light, Walt stood naked.

“What is it, sweetheart?” he asked quietly.

Amanda froze, suddenly and inexplicably terrified of Walt.

“Come to bed,” he said.

A sob welled up in her throat. Walt took a step forward and Amanda could see that his feet were still stained with the blood from the hallway. She screamed.

Before she could hear another word from him, Amanda was running for the front door in her bare feet.

The front door slammed shut and, half a minute later, Amanda's car coughed to life outside. Walt shuffled over to the bedroom window, pulled back the curtain and peered out. All he could see were dim red tail-lights disappearing into the distance. For a moment, he almost believed he could feel the heat from those hazy red lights on his face. He wiped a slick swatch of sweat from his face with the palm of his hand and realized that it was only the house. As hot and humid as it was outside, the house acted like an incubator, making it that much hotter inside. It was an old house, after all—nearly eighty years old, and with no central heat and air. He considered shopping around for a pair of window units in the morning, or maybe the day after that.

Then Walt went back to bed.

Chapter Six

The phone kept ringing. Walt had no answering machine, so the irritating jangling just went on and on. Still, he had no intention of answering it. It was probably just that roofer again, angry as hell that he showed up at the agreed upon time and found no one home. The truth was that Walt was asleep, *deeply* asleep, but now he did not even want the roofer's services anymore. It hardly ever rained in the summer around there, anyway. And even when it did, it was not as though a little water ever hurt anybody.

On the other hand, Walt considered, it might also have been Amanda. Three days had come and gone since she went screaming out of the house in the middle of the night. Depending upon one's perspective, three days could be a long time. It was a blink of an eye in the course of a human life, but three days without food or water was an eternity. Walt sat down on the edge of his bed and thought about three days without Amanda. What he decided was that it did not bother him much. If it was suppose to hurt or vex him, it did not. All he had done was wake up to the obnoxious clatter she was making at that ungodly hour. It was her own mental unbalance that made her react so strangely. If she wanted to talk to Walt about it—which he thought had better include a sincere apology—she knew where he lived.

After thirteen rings, the house finally fell silent again. Silent apart from the squelching wet sounds emanating from the hallway ceiling, at any rate.

It started the day after Amanda's bizarre departure. Walt was drifting in and out of sleep on the bed (he was just so damned tired these days), asleep enough to hazily dream but too awake to make any sense out of it. He tossed and turned and managed to kick all of the sheets off the bed, and eventually he just snapped himself awake and called it a draw. He did not see it at all, not at first, but he might have heard it. He certainly smelled it; that same rotten meat odor that permeated the attic. Stifling a retching gag as he had before, Walt slowly approached the doorway and peered up.

The stain had widened substantially. It was easily a foot and a half wide now, and it was thick and viscous. The dripping appeared to have stopped so that the blood—or whatever it was—stayed in place. But it pulsed and undulated like ripples in a pond and there were several sinewy strands dangling down from it. Walt counted seven strands in all and judged them to be uniform in length, about six inches. They were the same rusty dark red as the stain itself, but with barely visible pink and white threads twisted throughout each one. To Walt, they looked very much like muscle tissue.

He gingerly edged around it, careful not to pass directly beneath, until he was on the opposite end of the hall. From there he stared a while longer before retreating into the kitchen and retrieving a long pair of

silver tongs from a drawer. Walt returned to the end of the hall and stretched his arm up toward the strands until the tips the tongs almost touched them. The meaty strands pulled taut and shot at the tongs in unison, coiling around the rounded tips and wrenching them from Walt's grasp. He gasped and watched in horror as the bloody strands mauled the tongs, turning them one way and then another before suddenly releasing them. They dropped to the hardwood floor with a loud clang. Walt jumped, startled. He could not believe his own eyes.

All he could think to say was, "Fuck."

The dripping tendrils in the ceiling seemed to quiver in response.

Despite his revulsion, Walt's curiosity subsumed him. He found the rope hanging from the white square at the other side of the hall, yanked it hard and hurried up the steps that clattered down to him.

The attic, Walt discovered, was an altogether different story.

Where the warm, spongy mass had been the night before, there was now a red, veiny lump the size of a football. All around the base of the lump tiny splinters jutted out at various angles. Walt did not know what it was, but it was clear to him that it had successfully broken through the paneling.

Perhaps more disturbing were the sundry animal corpses scattered around the throbbing thing. They were the rats Walt had suspected of infesting his attic, but

these rats were eaten away, dissolved down to their bones.

It was no longer just a stain. It was a living entity.
And it was feeding.

Chapter Seven

Squashed up on one end of the couch with his knees touching his chin and a can of Stroh's in his left hand, Walt considered his options. His initial instinct, purely primordial and reactionary, was to try to kill it. He thought about poisoning it, cutting it, dropping a heavy weight on it and burning it. Then another proclivity hailing from deep in his genes kicked in: fear. What if he tried to kill it, but failed? How would the thing react? Gruesome visions of the pulsing red creature in the attic taunted Walt's mind, images of the thing flying into a rage, growing, whipping those awful, dripping tendrils at him.

No, Walt decided he would not attempt to kill the thing in his attic. Not yet, at any rate.

The next option that occurred to him concerned telling somebody. Not just anyone, but someone who could either identify the organism or at the very least take it to some laboratory far away from its present location. The university, or perhaps the government. Maybe, Walt wondered, he should just call 911. But that was no good, either. Walt had never placed much faith in the so-called authorities before, much less academia, and could see no reason to start now.

That left Walt right where he started, puzzled and scared. He sucked down the last of his beer and crumpled the can in his fist. He took a deep breath, held it, and then exhaled loudly. Then the squirming mass on

the ceiling erupted into a series of nauseating wet noises, like a bucket full of worms crawling all over one another. Walt shivered, stood up and grabbed his keys from the kitchen counter.

Twenty miles or so northeast from Walt's house there was a small bar called Tiny's. From door to door one would have to travel down a twisting, two-lane country road for eight miles until it dunked down to the interstate, which went almost directly to the bar. Not long after his encounter with the pulsing, disembodied organ in the attic, that was precisely what Walt did.

The sun was still up when he arrived, and there were scant customers inside. By the time business picked up and the juke box started to swing, Walt was three sheets to the wind. He lost count of how many tall, frosty mugs of the house's cheapest tap he consumed up until that point, but suffice to say he was blotto. And, as men who are blotto have been doing since time immemorial, Walt was talking far too much.

"Lost a woman, gained a lump a' meat," he slurred from his seat by the men's room.

Most of Tiny's patrons, regulars and moonlighters both, chose to ignore the mumbling inebriate in the corner. Nearly every bar had one, and the only real choice anyone ever had was to pay them no mind. For the two giggling frat boys out on a bender, however, Walt was providing free entertainment they could not

turn down. The shorter of the two was built like a fireplug and sported an outmoded blonde flattop. His much taller buddy, a reedy kid with a splotchy, acne-ridden face, kicked off the festivities when he slammed his mug down on Walt's table.

"What's this about your meat?" he chuckled.

"Big as my head," Walt explained without missing a beat. "Fucker eats rats."

"That so?" snickered the fireplug.

Walt cracked a wild grin.

"Came with the house," he said, bursting into a gale of laughter.

Splotchy and the fireplug regarded one another with apprehensive looks. The latter rose up from his chair, followed by the former. Walt reached over and seized the tall one by his wrist and hissed, "Wanna see it?"

"No, man," the acne-faced kid nervously stammered. "It's cool."

"Maybe we can get it to eat a rat. You know, right in front of us, like that."

Walt's face split into a maniacal grin as the tall kid wrenched his wrist free and both frat boys made tracks for the door. His laughter chased them clear out to the parking lot. It also annoyed one of the stone-faced pool players nearby enough that the husky man waddled over to Walt, his beefy hands curled into fists.

"You want to knock it off?" the man roared.

Walt managed to swallow his laughter as he wagged a forefinger at the angry man.

“I got a thing in my attic,” Walt babbled, “that’d eat you up.”

“That right? Well I got an automatic in my glove compartment that’d ventilate your fucking skull, so settle the fuck down.”

Walt’s eye’s widened and his wagging finger went up to his lips.

“Shhh,” he hissed.

“Christ,” the man grunted as he waddled back to the pool table.

The night dragged on in much the same way. Whenever anyone came within earshot, Walt tried to tell them about the thing in the attic. Those who did not simply dismiss him got either angry or a little scared. Eventually the burly, bearded New Englander behind the bar came barreling across the room to toss Walt out of the place. He was a bit rough about it—digging his knuckles into the small of Walt’s back and employing some choice words—but Walt did not particularly mind. He just ended up sitting on the concrete steps in front of Tiny’s, staring at his own car in the parking lot and waiting until he was sober enough to drive.

After the better part of an hour had passed, he was still stewed. A little longer after that, the patrons started to stumble out of the bar and the red neon OPEN sign went off.

Walt stood up, swayed and almost fell over. He steadied himself and staggered over to his car. Locating the correct key and getting it into the small, dark slot

was a Herculean task, but he managed it and got into the car. In front of him the steering wheel throbbed, but he knew it was only his impaired vision.

“Goddamnit,” Walt grumbled under his ripe, alcoholic breath. He was in no shape to drive.

He got back out of the car, locked the door, and started walking. It was six long blocks until he stumbled upon a dingy no-tell motel with a gravel strewn courtyard in the middle. *I’ll sleep it off*, Walt told himself. *Just a couple of hours.*

The room cost forty dollars and there was a plastic baby buggy shaped like a car parked in front of the door. Walt kicked the orange monstrosity out of the way as he fit the key in the lock. It was much easier this time around. Walt smiled and went into the room. He was instantly assaulted with a haze of stale cigarette smoke, body odor and alcohol. For a second, he thought he had gone into the wrong room, but when he switched on the light, he found it empty.

Walt shut the door and latched the guard chain. The room was nominally clean, but the smell was appalling. Still, he had to admit to himself that it beat that rancid meat odor permeating his own house. With a heavy sigh, he laid down on top of the dusty comforter on the bed. He was asleep in minutes.

* * *

Long serpentine strands slithered up the sides of the bed from underneath, probing Walt's body and leaving sticky pink trails wherever they touched. His skin burned wherever they made contact with it, but before he could get away the tendrils were wrapping around his ankles, knees and wrists. Bound tightly, Walt bucked and writhed but it was to no avail. The throbbing entity under the bed had him and there was no escape.

He could hear the loud thumping, like a colossal heart that was pumping gallons of blood at an ungodly speed. Then it stopped all at once and the room was dead silent for several long seconds before the moaning started. To Walt it sounded like the deafening creak of a tipping long ship, but it was more plaintive than that, more *human*. Equal parts rage and sorrow echoed outward, splitting Walt's eardrums as the monstrous moan grew louder and louder. When the dozen or so thinner strands sprang up and two of them found his ear canals, he was almost relieved. He could feel the warm, clammy strands push deeply into his head as more of them wiggled in front of him, pressing into his mouth and his nostrils. Seconds after the worm-like appendages pushed into his anus, Walt found that he could no longer breathe. What would have been a scream was stifled when the rancid tentacles began digging into his eyes.

He was already vomiting before he woke up. It was too late to staunch the heaving flow of it, so Walt was left to

puke all over himself and the bed until it was done. His stomach ached and his throat felt like he swallowed a pinecone. The fresh memory of his nightmare lingered as strongly as the acrid taste in his mouth.

Bent over like Quasimodo, Walt lurched over to the bathroom sink, whipping his shirt off along the way. There was no toothpaste, much less a toothbrush, so he rinsed his face and mouth with tepid water several times over. He rinsed the shirt, too, and rung it out over the tub before putting it back on. The comforter, he decided, was not his problem.

The good news was that he was stone cold sober now. He felt worse than he had in long, long time, but he would be able to drive home without endangering himself and others any more than usual. Thus Walt retraced the six blocks to Tiny's in a damp tee shirt, savoring the coolness of the faint breeze on his wet torso. He liked it so much, in fact, that he ran the air conditioning in his hatchback at full blast all the way back.

When Walt reached the winding country road leading back to his outlying house, a light rain started to spot the windshield. He fumbled for the lever to switch on the wipers, momentarily forgetting where it was. He found it, turned it down, and squinted through the smears left across the windshield by the worn out wiper blades. His mind drifted to his ever-growing to do list, not adding *new wiper blades* to the throng, and he worried about the multitudinous holes in his roof now

that it was raining. Walt managed to lose enough concentration on the world outside of his head that he only noticed the deer in the middle of the road when he was less than three yards shy of ramming it.

Jerking the steering wheel by way of reflex alone, Walt's hatchback skidded on the wet road and spun ninety degrees before slamming into a thick old growth oak.

Walt raised his head from the steering column. Blood ran down his forehead from a cut at his hairline. It dripped in his eyes, stinging them. He sat back, wiping his face with his hands and moaning. When his vision cleared, he gazed through the windshield at the white steam rising through the rain from beneath the dented hood.

"For this," he groaned to himself, "I slept it off."

Walt pulled the door handle, kicked the door open, and stepped out into the warm, sprinkling rain. It pattered lightly and rhythmically on the leaves that hemmed the road in on both sides. Walt could not help but be reminded of the stain on his ceiling, similarly dripping down on the floor. His stomach lurched at the thought.

Shaking it off, Walt crawled back into the car and shifted into reverse. He gently applied pressure to the accelerator and the engine growled, but the car refused to budge. Shifting back into park, Walt melted into the

seat and glared out at the hazy columns of light extending from his headlights out into the wet, dark forest.

Two options occurred to him: he could sit in the car until morning, or he could walk home. Walt chose option two, cutting the engine and locking the doors. No more than ten feet up the ink black backroad, the sky opened up and drenched him with hard, fast rain.

He smelled the sickening odor from the driveway; it hit him the moment he stepped onto the property. Combined with the persistent taste of vomit in his mouth and throat, it was nearly enough to knock Walt over. Once again shielding his olfactory sensors in the crook of his arm, Walt strode cautiously toward the house. The rain had abated somewhat, although it was still drizzling. His shoes squeaked on the porch steps.

Walt dug into his pocket for the house keys when a silhouetted figure stood up on the porch and approached him. Walt gave a frightened shout, stumbled backward and fell on his rump.

“Christ, Walt,” Amanda said. “What’s the matter with you?”

Walt let out a long, labored breath and looked up at her.

“You scared the shit out of me.”

“It’s four in the morning. Where have you been?”

“Sleeping off a bender. That all right with you?”

He got back to his feet and rubbed his sore backside. His pants were as thoroughly soaked as the rest of him.

"Did you walk? From town?"

"No, just from where I crashed into a tree. About three miles back."

Amanda gasped.

"You *crashed your car*? Goddamnit, Walt! You drove *drunk*!"

Walt sneered as he jammed the house key into the lock.

"No, I did not drive drunk. I slept if off, just like I said. There was a fucking deer in the road, I swerved and hit a tree. Of course the goddamn car is totaled."

The front door creaked open and Walt fumbled for the foyer light. When it came on, he turned back to Amanda and pointed at the crusty crimson wound on his forehead.

"Thanks for your concern, by the way. I'm fine."

"Concern?" Amanda roared. "You want to talk about concern? Three days I've been calling you. Three days, Walt! I've come by twice, three times now. And not a word from you! Not one fucking word! What have I done, can you tell me that?"

Walt glared impassively at her.

"You're the one who ran screaming out of here."

"You didn't see it," she gravely answered.

Walt scrunched up his face and leaned against the doorjamb.

"See what, exactly?"

Her face darkening, Amanda dropped her chin to her chest and shuddered.

“That thing on your ceiling...”

“What thing? That stain?”

“It’s not just a stain, Walt. I watched it...eat a bug. A cockroach, for crissakes.”

Walt twisted his mouth into a crooked smile and gave her an incredulous look.

“It’s the truth! It reached out for it, swallowed it up. I saw it!”

She was hugging herself tightly now, bouncing on her heels and looking a little afraid. Walt could not help himself. He erupted into a fit of wild laughter. Amanda was dumbstruck.

“I’m sure you saw it, sweetheart,” he said between heaving chuckles. “But it doesn’t do that anymore. It’s a lot bigger, now. It’s moved on to rats.”

Amanda’s mouth dropped open like a door on broken hinges. Walt went into the house, his laughter trailing after him as he vanished from her view.

Tears welled up in Amanda’s eyes as she turned the key in the ignition. She flipped on the headlights and the beams illuminated Walt’s front porch. His front door was still open, but he was nowhere in sight. The tears spilled over and ran down her cheeks.

Her confusion was infuriating. Not only was she puzzled about Walt’s bizarre behavior, she was puzzled

by what, exactly, was upsetting her more: his heartless attitude toward her, or her revulsion at the thing growing in that house. Somehow, Amanda was sure there was a connection between the two, the house and the rapid deterioration of her relationship with Walt. In three years she had never seen him like this, never before he moved into the gable front cottage at the edge of town. And, as she backed down the driveway and pulled out onto the road, she wondered if she was ever going to see him again at all.

Walt was still cackling when he seized a can of Stroh's from the refrigerator and cracked it open. The cold beer felt marvelous going down his throat, washing the acrid remnants of vomit away. He licked his lips and gulped some more. When the can was empty, he set it on the counter and headed for the john. He noticed that the front door remained open and saw Amanda's car dissolving into the darkness. Walt frowned. It occurred to him that he should care—about the door, at the very least, if not Amanda—but for some reason he did not. He shrugged and continued to the bathroom.

Inches from the doorway to the john, something tickled the top of Walt's head. He stopped and slowly looked up, having momentarily forgotten all about the thing on the ceiling.

One of its tendrils was probing his hairline, exploring the tender cut there. Walt winced from the stinging

pain and edged away from it. The stain was not much of a stain anymore. It looked much more like a massive slab of meat, as if someone affixed a thick raw steak to the ceiling. Walt curled his lips in disgust and hurried into the bathroom. He flipped the light switch and pulled his zipper down, and then he heard the loud, wet sucking noises emanating from the thing out there.

Walt paused, unsure if he would even be able to urinate now. Then he yanked the zipper back up and peered out and up at the organism above him.

Walt gave a frightened shout and fell back into the bathroom.

The thing was indeed making sucking sounds. It sucked with malformed lips, hidden amidst the wriggling tendrils. For there grew a gruesome red face.

Chapter Eight

"You look awful," Nora said cheerfully.

She came around the counter and shoved her grinning face close to Amanda's. On her left hand crawled a black spider the size of a nickel. To Amanda's immense chagrin, creeping, crawling things were something of a passion for Nora. Amanda arched an eyebrow and sneered.

"Wow," Nora exclaimed. "You *really* look awful. What's up?"

"Rough night," Amanda croaked, ignoring the hairy spider that was now advancing up Nora's forearm. Her voice was coarse and quiet, the inevitable side effect of having cried all through the night.

"Walt?"

"Yeah," Amanda answered noncommittally.

The bell over the door jangled and a customer came in; an older man with stark white hair and a moustache to match. Amanda smiled at him, but he ignored her and made a beeline for the computer books.

Amanda and Nora had opened the shop around the same time Amanda first began dating Walt. It began life as a small bookstore they named *In The Reads*, but they now sold a host of useless accoutrements and knick-knacks just to keep up with the ample competition in town. Neither of them got rich, nor had they ever expected to. They got by, and that was enough.

“He didn’t hit you, did he?” Nora whispered conspiratorially.

“No! Of course not. Nothing like that.”

“Another girl?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Huh.”

Nora looked stumped, as though physical abuse and infidelity were the only problems her mind could conceive. The white-haired man shuffled up to the register and slapped a thin paperback volume down on the counter. A collection of erotic fiction. *So much for computers*, Amanda thought as she smiled and rang him up. He paid in cash and left without a word. The women were alone again, and Nora still looked confused.

“Is it over?” she asked at length.

“I don’t know. I hope not. But...”

Nora waited for her to finish, but she just trailed off.

“But what?”

Amanda turned away from Nora, focusing on an endcap loaded up with novelty pens and playing cards with pictures of famous authors on the backs. But she did not see them; she saw the blood in Walt’s house, reaching out and snatching the cockroach for a midnight snack. Only now it was more than just a roach. At least that was what Walt said.

It’s moved on to rats.

He seemed so happy about it, like a proud parent. Amanda knitted her brow and returned her attention to Nora.

“Nothing,” she said.

Chapter Nine

Walt got off the phone with the towing company and checked the clock on the stove. A quarter to two. Plenty of time.

He flipped back through the phone book, moving from T (towing) back to P (pet stores and supplies). The tow truck was expected to pick up Walt's hatchback some time between three and five, so if he called a taxi now there should be ample time to get to the nearest pet store and back before the battered vehicle arrived in his driveway. A cursory glance at the list of pet shop competitors informed him that Georgia's Pets on Mill Street would likely be the closest. He dogeared the page and flipped back over to the T's (taxis).

Figuring it did not matter which taxi service he used, Walt called the first one listed: AAA Cab Co. He stressed that he was in a small hurry and that he would need the driver to wait to take him back home again.

The taxi arrived twenty-five minutes later. Walt considered himself quite fortunate that he did not get stuck with a chatty driver. The ride to Mill Street was blissfully quiet.

The girl in the pet shop was small and mousy looking, with her wildly curly black hair stuffed clumsily into a bun on top. She stared at Walt without expression when he came in, raising her eyebrows solicitously. He smiled and nodded, striding across the store and examining the sundry animals for sale.

The place smelled strongly of cedar chips and disinfectant. The front of the store was taken up by squawking birds and a number of dozen different types of rodents—rats, gerbils, hamsters, guinea pigs and even a chinchilla. As Walt moved to the back of the store, the species turned largely reptilian, although there was a fair number of tarantulas and scorpions on the back wall, as well. He looked around and sighed. No normal pets, just exotic ones. And there was not enough time to look into another shop. Walt crooked his mouth to one side and walked over to the shopgirl.

“How much for the guinea pigs?”

“Fifteen each.”

Walt slid his wallet out of the back pocket of his jeans and took a peak inside.

“I’ll take three,” he said.

“All right,” the girl said, beginning to brighten up a bit. “Let’s look at cages and linings, okay? Not all of these cages come with water bottles...”

Walt reached out and touched her shoulder.

“I don’t need all that extra stuff,” he said sternly. “Just the animals, okay?”

The girl’s brow sank over her eyes, shadowing them.

“All right,” she said darkly. “Get the hell out of my shop.”

Walt leaned back and grimaced at her.

“Get out of your shop?”

“You heard me. Piss off. I mean it.”

“Do you normally chase paying customers out of your place of business, or just me?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, prick. Anyone who wants to but ‘just the animals’ and nothing to actually take care of them is up to no damn good. I’ve seen it before and it’s heartbreaking and if you’re not out of here in five seconds I’m calling the police.”

“The police? For trying to buy some fucking *guinea pigs*?”

“Four seconds.”

“This is outrageous.”

“Three seconds.”

“Go ahead and call them. I’m eager to hear what they say to you about this.”

“Two seconds. I’m not messing around.”

Walt’s right hand curled into a tight fist. The girl flashed a smug grin at him.

“And that’s one. Hang around and wait for them, if you like.”

She marched over the front counter, pulled a phone up from underneath it and began dialing.

“I’ve got a cab waiting,” Walt said in a quiet rage.

He stalked out of the shop and got back into the running taxi. As the taxi rolled away, he could see the girl hanging the phone up and smiling triumphantly.

Walt seethed all the way back to the house.

* * *

The hatchback sat crooked in the driveway when the cab dropped Walt off. The front end of the car was caved in, a perfect fit for the big oak he slammed into. He shook his head at the ruins of his car, wondering what to do about it and how he was going to afford it. So much of his reserves had already been poured into the house, leaving scant cash for unforeseen events like a totaled car. He walked a circle around it, studying the damage and silently cursing himself for having had the accident in the first place. At least he could still live in a house with a hundred holes in the roof. And one very peculiar hole in the ceiling.

Walt turned toward the porch and took a few steps before a high-pitched mewling attracted his attention. He paused, turned around and narrowed his eyes at the tree line at the edge of his property. Although he could not see them from where he stood, Walt knew that the black cat was feeding her kittens in the woods again.

He slowly walked over to the trees.

The mouth, such as it was, twisted and puckered. It looked as though it were trying to speak, or maybe kiss. Walt had not noticed anything resembling teeth in it before, but he could now see small white nubs protruding at various angles beneath the wet, sopping lips. Above the mouth, a chunk of pink cartilage jutted out of the sticky mass. The beginnings of a nose.

Walt stared at it for a moment. Then a gnarled flap of bumpy flesh darted out from between the lips. *Its tongue*, he realized.

At Walt's feet was a cardboard box, on top of which the word BOOKS was written in permanent marker. All of the books that had been in the box were now stacked neatly in the dining room. The box wiggled. A weak, quiet squeak emanated from within. Walt sneered at it, and then he sneered at the deep crimson scratch on the back of his right hand. Mama had done that, enraged at the theft of her baby. Walt had not expected the cat to strike out like that, but the animal turned out to be feral. She had no trust for human beings and, as Walt clearly demonstrated, she had no reason to. Nonetheless, he managed to snatch the tiny kitten by the scruff of its neck and get away with no more than the one injury.

Now Walt opened the box and reached inside, again seizing the crying kitten by the loose skin on the back of its neck. The tongue above him lashed about, dripping blood-infused saliva on Walt's face and shoulders.

"You're hungry," he said, not expecting it to hear or understand him. It had no ears.

The mouth stretched open a little wider, cracking audibly. Walt lifted the kitten higher. A lump of red, veiny flesh wobbled in the mass, splitting apart to reveal a bloodshot eye. Walt gasped.

"Christ," he said, titling his head to get a better look at the solitary, roaming eye. "Can you see?"

He waved the screeching cat back and forth beneath the eye, and the eye followed it intently. The mouth slavered, the tongue licking the lips with anticipation. When Walt lifted the struggling animal higher still, the wriggling strands shot at it and rapidly coiled around the cat's neck and legs. One of the strands dug into the fresh scratch on his hand, too. Walt cried out in pain and jerked his hand free.

"Watch it!" he screamed.

If the creature on the ceiling understood him, it paid him no mind. It was far too occupied with the thrashing kitten in its grasp, pulling it close enough for that grotesque mouth to bite into its belly. The cat gave a chilling shriek as its abdomen was torn open by the gnawing teeth. Walt swallowed hard and looked away. Blood splashed on the floor behind him and he heard a loud crunch. When he looked back, the kitten was mangled, dead.

The mouth greedily sucked at the fluids that seeped out of the split belly.

"Jesus Christ," Walt groaned.

The eye appeared to stare at Walt while the blunt teeth tore into the kitten.

Chapter Ten

Amanda shivered as she stirred the can-shaped chunk of condensed soup into the milk that surrounded it. Her apartment felt cold. Cold and dark and strangely foreign. In the last few weeks, Amanda had spent little time in her own place. She even joked with Nora that the one-bedroom walk-up served more as a storage unit for her stuff than anything else. After all, most nights she slept at Walt's. With Walt. But not tonight.

When the orange goop finally began to blend with the milk, Amanda gave the concoction another whirl with the whisk before stealing away to the short hallway between the bathroom and bedroom. There was no light in the hall, so she had to turn on the bathroom light to illuminate the controls for the central heat and air. Amanda almost always kept it off when she was not at home, and since her apartment was buried in the building with other units on top and both sides, it tended to get pretty chilly when the sun went down. She squinted in the dim light emanating from the bathroom, peering closely at the black and gray readout on the control unit. 62 degrees. Even the number made her skin raise with goosebumps. She flipped open the cover, played with the overly complicated network of buttons for several seconds, and finally convinced the thing to get working toward a comfortable 71.

The soup on the stovetop had come to a boil during her two minute absence.

“Shit,” Amanda grunted.

She seized the pot by the handle, quickly moving it to a cool burner, but it was too late. She ruined the soup.

Her bottom lip quivering, tears spilled out of Amanda’s eyes and she began to loudly weep. Anyone would have thought she was nuts had they observed the spectacle; who breaks down over a ruined can of seventy-nine cent soup? It was, of course, much more than that. The soup was just the last straw, the one that broke her proverbial camel’s back. And that camel was named Walt.

Amanda dropped the pot in the sink with a resounding clang. Wiping her eyes on the sleeve of her pullover, she weighed the pros and cons of giving Walt a call. Just to see how he was doing. Maybe, Amanda thought, they would both end up apologizing and before long her blubbering would transform into relieved laughter. But even as she found herself dialing his number, she greatly doubted that this would be the case.

The line purred its soft ring once, twice, and then three times. Immediately after the fourth, Amanda heard a loud click. Then silence.

“Walt?”

No response came from the other end. Still, Amanda was almost certain she could hear soft breathing coming through the receiver.

“Walt? Are you there?”

The breathing got louder, as though he knew he was caught and was not bothering to attempt silence any longer.

“I...I can hear you, Walt. Are you going to say anything?”

A short burst of air hit the line, a grunt forced through it. Like a mean little laugh. *Heh.*

The line went dead after that. Her eyes bulging with disbelief, Amanda slowly raised the receiver and hung it back on the hooks. She remained in the kitchen for several minutes, staring at the wall with her arms hanging limp at her sides. She felt fairly certain that this was the end, that she had been unceremoniously dumped. As much as that pained her—and it pained her plenty—it was not the primary source of her hurt and confusion. It was the manner with which Walt did it, the coldness and total lack of kindness. That was not the same Walt with whom Amanda fell in love, the Walt who loved books and kids and got all giddy whenever he waxed poetic about their future together, the English teacher and his dear, sweet girl. Marriage had never come up explicitly, but there was always that knowing sparkle in Walt’s eyes when he slyly hinted at it. Amanda did not doubt that a proposal was just around the corner, at least not before he moved into that house.

That awful house. With that even more awful *thing* living in it. *Growing* in it.

Amanda shuddered, recalling the nightmarish sight of the gelatinous puddle hungrily sucking up that

cockroach and devouring it completely. At that point, the nasty thing was twice as big as it was when Walt first discovered it. There was no telling how much it had grown since then. Or what it hungered for now.

The back of her throat burned from the bile that lurched up from her stomach. In her mind, Amanda pictured shoving a flaming torch at the thing, burning it up and being done with it. Maybe then Walt might come back to the land of the living. Even if he still wanted to call it quits, he would at least return to being the same gentle Walt he had always been, before he moved into his new home in the boondocks.

“Yeah, sure,” she muttered, shaking her head.

Amanda could not exactly see herself bursting into the house like some comic book superheroine with a torch clutched in her fist, screaming *Out of the way, Walt! It's that thing or me!*

It was stupid. Amanda hung her head, jamming her chin into her breastbone.

She did not know what to do.

The broad, open expanse of the field stretched from the end of Walt's property to a line of trees at least a quarter of a mile away. Broken wooden nubs protruded from the dry earth in intermittent intervals all around the field, rotting vestiges of what had once been a fence, long ago. Whoever owned the huge parcel of land now had let it go to seed; it was overgrown with tall yellow grass and

thick tangles of weeds. In the week that passed since he brought the first box inside the house, Walt had yet to see a single living soul set foot on the field. To his mind, it was practically his.

Having slept most of the night, save for that irritating call from Amanda, Walt was fresh and ready to go when he set out for the field in the first hour of sunlight. He wore his rarely used pair of beige hiking boots and carried an iron fire poker in his right hand. He would have preferred one of those litter pickers the convicts used on the interstate median to collect all the garbage, but he had high hopes for the heavy metal instrument. A field like that was bound to be rife with all manners of creeping and crawling critters; snakes and moles and rabbits and such. Food for the hungry mouth on the ceiling.

He strode slowly and carefully into the field, his boots crushing the deep growth underneath as he waded through it. Above and around him some birds chirped while others cackled. Something cut a rapid path through the grass several yards in front of him, too far away to do anything about it. Despite the hour, it was already hot enough for Walt to break a sweat. The scent of his own perspiration mixed with the strong, pungent odor of the rain-starved grass and the weeds that choked it. It smelled like summer, like camping. Walt smiled at the sensation as he moved further into the field.

When he was a quarter of the way across, it occurred to Walt that his plan of attack was not a particularly

good one. No matter how quietly he tried to move, his boots still clomped and rustled loudly through the undergrowth. No wild animal in the world was likely to miss his approach. Walt felt like the worst predator in history.

He stopped when he reached the middle of the field and sighed heavily. This simply was not going to work. At the very least, Walt was going to need to set some traps, something else he did not know anything about. If he was really serious about netting some game, he figured a gun might also be a good idea. Something with a small caliber, like a .22. He did not want to blow any of the little creatures to smithereens. At any rate, whatever he did the damned fire poker was a ridiculous idea from the start. Hunting small game was not akin to sneaking up on a burglar. Walt blew a short burst of air through his nostrils and groaned. There had to be better options.

Of course, Walt had already ruined the pet shop in town for a resource. The hippie bitch who ran the place was likely to chase him out of there with a broom if he tried stepping foot in there again. He should not have been so single-minded in his approach. He should have been aware of how it was going to look if he treated that little excursion like what it really was—grocery shopping. But then, hindsight was 20/20, for whatever the hell that was worth.

The creature—if one could accurately call it that—had clearly been satisfied with the kitten. It fed on the

poor, squealing thing for the better part of an hour before letting its decimated, pulpy remains drop to the floor. It had been a beneficial meal, too; in the day since that feast the thing on the ceiling had grown appreciably. It covered more surface area, for one thing, but more interesting was the small, knobby bulge beside its one probing eye. Soon enough, it was going to be blessed with three-dimensional vision. Naturally that would require sustained sustenance, though. And Walt just didn't have the heart to steal another kitten from the black cat in the woods. The thought of it alone made his stomach flip.

In the interim, after Amanda's unwelcome phone call had wakened him, Walt had attempted a different tack. By then the thing had started to let out irritating screeching sounds, like a dying grackle or something. It was hungry again and, Walt presumed, demanding more meat. So he went back into the kitchen, opened up the refrigerator, and searched for something that would suffice. What he settled on was a half pound of beef rump steak that he planned to grill in the next day or two. After extracting the cold, red slab from the fridge and peeling away the plastic, he brought it to the hallway and held it up with both hands like some ancient priest offering a sacrifice to its raging deity.

The tendrils went wild when the lone eyeball caught sight of the meat, wriggling and stretching out toward it. The mouth stretched open, and from within its dark pit came the probing tongue, dripping with saliva.

*Ahhhhh*g, it went.

Walt stepped back, then. He was afraid. The eerie moan was not expected, and now his arms and hands were trembling. All the same, he maintained his supplicant pose, the meat held high in the air. The shiny red strands poked and prodded at the surface of the cool, marbled slab. They seemed uncertain, but the slavering mouth would not be denied. The strands dug into the soft meat and coiled around it, snatching it out of Walt's hands. They retracted, yanking the rump steak toward the mouth. The tongue slapped against the meat and licked it from one end to the other. Then the short, nubby teeth sank into the offering. Walt smiled nervously.

The mouth then snapped open and shrieked. It let go of the meat as though it was on fire, letting it fall to the dirty hardwood floor with a resounding smack. Walt jumped back and gaped. The mouth went on shrieking while the tendrils furiously writhed and snapped. The experiment was a colossal failure. Dead meat was never going to sate the ravenous creature on the ceiling.

Hence the fire poker and hiking boots. But that, too, was turning out to be a wash. Walt moaned with exasperation as he resolved to tread back through the brush and weeds to his own property. He slashed at the grass with the heavy iron poker along the way, imagining that it was a machete and he was some intrepid pulp magazine explorer in the humid jungles of deepest, darkest Africa.

The reverie came to an abrupt end at the sound of a high-pitched squeal. Walt actually hit something.

Stunned, he knelt down in the tall, dry grass and parted the growth where the end of the poker last struck. There lay a small brown rabbit, hardly bigger than a kit, moving in desperate, rapid circles on its side. Walt stared at the suffering creature, noting the blood in its fur and the awkward way its back leg twisted and jutted backward.

“Huh,” he said. “Must have broken it.”

He grinned abashedly. In an odd sort of way, he felt pity for the rabbit. He had not meant to strike it, even if he had come into the field for that very purpose in the first place. Still, there was nothing else for it, now. A wild rabbit with a broken back leg was as good as dead, anyway.

Walt seized the shivering animal by the scruff of its neck, just as he had seized the kitten before it. He raised it up until it was eye-level with him. Its mouth hung open and its glossy black eyes glared at Walt with horror.

“Lucky me,” Walt said.

“If it were me,” Walt said cheerily, “it’d be Brunswick stew. Oh, with fresh cornbread, too. But for you, my friend...”

The red, dripping jaws clamped down on the rabbit’s neck, sending a crimson spray splashing against the wall.

“...you can have it rare. A rare hare. Ha, ha.”

Walt grinned broadly as the young rabbit ceased its struggling and the mouth sucked at its bloody tendons and the soft, juicy organs beneath them. As he watched it feed, the round knob beside the creature's eye split open, finally revealing its second eye. It was only then that Walt realized that the irises were both pale blue.

He also realized that among the thing's many writhing tendrils, two of them had grown thicker. These two did not wriggle as much as the others, a disability caused by the development of bony joints in the middle. At the ends of the two jointed limbs were several knobby appendages, red and pudgy, like baby fingers with no skin on them. The fingers wiggled, trying to find purchase in the rabbit's blood-matted fur.

Walt stared and smiled with his mouth open.

"My god," he rasped. "Would you look at that?"

Ignoring his wonder entirely, the feasting creature paused in its gorging long enough to moan with pleasure.

Chapter Eleven

"You look like you need a drink," Nora said a little too loud.

A blue-haired old woman in the cooking session shot her a nasty look. Nora just smiled at her.

"It's ten-thirty in the morning," Amanda reminded her.

"Well, I didn't mean right now. Unless it's that bad, anyway. Sometimes you really do need a stiff drink first thing."

"I sincerely hope you're joking."

Nora laughed and nudged Amanda with her hip.

"Come off it—I went to college with you, remember? I've seen you chug two liters of PBR through a surgical tube, and in your matching red underwear, no less."

The blue-hair resumed her disapproving stare. Amanda turned white, all of the blood having drained out of her face.

"Keep it down, will you please?"

"You sure had a full dance card that night, I'll tell you."

"With shockingly little supervisory guidance from you, as I recall."

"Hey, my card didn't look too shabby, either. I swapped so much spit that night, a cheek swab would have driven a lab tech crazy."

Amanda wrinkled her nose.

"You're repulsive."

“I do try.”

“Have you had a blood test lately?”

“Why, are you afraid of catching something?”

Amanda shot a frown at Nora.

“You’re fired.”

“At last!” Nora cried. “Finally I can get some damn peace and quiet!”

The blue-hair snorted with discontent and shuffled out of the store. Amanda and Nora watched her go and then looked at one another.

“Think she was going to buy anything?” Amanda asked.

“I don’t know. She looked pretty cheap to me.”

“How do you think she gets that particular shade of blue, anyway?”

“A hundred and fifty years of trial and error, I guess.”

Amanda erupted into laughter at that. Nora smiled broadly as she picked up a clipboard from under the cash register and prepared to log in that week’s new arrivals.

“Okie dokey,” she exclaimed loudly, “let’s see how many erotic vampire novels we’ve got today.”

“Only three this time,” Amanda called back as Nora moved toward the back room. “I already checked.”

As Nora vanished into the back, Amanda heard a dramatic groan reverberate throughout the store. She smiled and shook her head, inwardly echoing the sentiment. A moment later, the phone beside the cash register rang. Amanda picked up the receiver.

“In the Reads, this is Amanda.”

"You lied," Nora growled. "There's four of 'em."

"One of those is a back order."

"Are you serious? That's a customer we don't need."

"We need *every* customer, you snob. Besides, how is that junk any worse than the porn you read with shirtless studs in kilts on the covers?"

"Because I *like* that junk."

"Of course. Is that all?"

"Still waiting on an answer about that drink."

Amanda rolled her eyes for no one's benefit but her own and sighed into the phone.

"When?"

"Tonight, natch. After work."

"Where?"

"Why not Tiny's?"

"What, that dive down by the airport? Are you out of your mind?"

"Kidding, 'Manda, kidding. Jeez, lighten up, would you?"

"Not going to Tiny's."

"I said I was kidding, didn't I?"

"Fine," Amanda growled. She was losing patience with the constant joking. On most days it could go on all day and she would just keep laughing along with it, but not today. "Where, then?"

"La Jolla's?"

"Okay," Amanda said with a flat voice. "La Jolla's."

"Excellent. Oh, and Amanda?"

"What?"

“She arched her back when Sebastian sank his fangs into the soft, white flesh of her neck. ‘Make me,’ Rebecca moaned. ‘Make me like you, my love.’”

“Hanging up, now.”

The receiver cracked an echo across the store.

Feeling grateful that he only had the one, Walt dumped his telephone in the kitchen wastebasket immediately after unplugging it. His most recent phone bill went in right after it. He might have phoned the telephone company and cancelled the service, but that would have required time on the phone, speaking to some disembodied voice that could not give any more of a damn about him than he could about it. Besides, the damned thing had been ringing night and day. It could not possibly have always been Amanda, either. Surely she had neither the time nor the inclination to ring Walt thirty times a day. He presumed a small percentage of the calls had to come from telemarketers, while others almost certainly originated from the school, or from his mortgage company, or from one of his egregiously disagreeable relatives. His spinster aunt Janet or his sister, Sarah. Walt did not want to speak with any of them. He did not want to speak with anyone at all.

The only thing Walt wanted to do was build up enough courage to climb up into the attic to assess the state of things from that side of the ceiling.

The creature—which he had come to think of as his roommate—was getting testy with Walt. He tried to empathize; after all, he did not know anybody who *didn't* get a little grouchy when their bellies were grumbling. But the roommate's belly (wherever *that* was) was always grumbling. Nothing sated it. When it finished with the rabbit, it let the teeth-scarred bones drop to the floor one by one before launching into that awful, ear-splitting screeching again. It wanted more. *Needed* more. Walt was not at all sure how to proceed.

On the one hand, he wondered how and why he should feel responsible for the thing's well-being. He had not put it there; he had not even invited it. It was Walt's house, he paid for it. Any other unanticipated visitor of another species would have been met with a stomping heel, a spray of poison or a call to the nearest exterminator. Conversely, Walt had already begun to take care of his new roommate. It was a ball in motion, rolled down the infinite hill by his own hand and none other. At this point, how could he possibly stop? That would be too much like taking in a stray dog and then suddenly refusing to feed it. Cruel. Inhumane, even. No, Walt *was* responsible for it now, whether he liked it or not.

It was practically a binding agreement.

He started pacing, unconsciously wringing his hands like a worried mother. He crossed the length of the kitchen, doubled back and rounded the living room into the dining room. Then he went back and did it all over

again, all the while thinking about his relationship with the roommate. At first, he labeled it symbiotic, but that was not exactly right. In symbiosis, both organisms stood to benefit mutually from the exchange, whereas Walt could determine no particular gain to be had. It was not truly parasitic, either; although the creature certainly seemed the parasite to him, he recognized that it had been his own choice to begin feeding the thing in the first place. In the end, Walt decided that his relationship with the roommate was rather more akin to a hermit crab and its shell—a relationship in which one of the parties is significantly helped while the other is neither helped nor harmed. Commensalism. That was it.

Although pedantically naming the biological type of relationship he shared with the thing on the ceiling did nothing with regard to allaying his fears and doubts, Walt felt tremendously better for having done so. Buffeted thusly, he strode confidently back to the hallway and peered up at the thing. It pulsed and wiggled, per usual. It searched the immediate area with its wide, blue eyes. And all but two of its sundry tendrils seemed to be retracting into its main mass, all but the two that were beginning to look like arms.

“You’re growing up,” Walt said to it.

Ahhhhhg, it replied.

Walt curled his lip, caught between fascination and disgust. Then he decided it was time to have a look in the attic.

* * *

La Jolla's was a sprawling bar and restaurant in the so-called Warehouse District, just on the periphery of what passed for a downtown. It had no parking of its own, just perpetually unavailable street parking, so Amanda and Nora arrived in a taxi. They presented their respective drivers' licenses to the indifferent doorman, shuffled inside and worked through the crowd to the bar. Top 40 hits pounded from the sundry speakers built into the walls and ceiling, rending conversation nearly impossible. Nora had to scream her choice of drink at the girl behind the bar.

"Two Fuck Faces!" she yelled as loud as she could.

Amanda blanched. Noting this, Nora gave her a wink and a coy smile. The multi-pierced bartender just nodded and got to work under the bar. A few moments later, she presented two double shot glasses filled to the rims with dark liquid, a thin green straw floating in each of them. Nora slapped a credit card on the bar, told the girl to keep it open, and grabbed the drinks. Amanda took hers and followed as Nora cut through the dense throng of drunks and college kids.

When they reached the back patio, Amanda wobbled her head. The music was significantly quieter there, but her ears continued to throb from the ridiculous volume inside. Nora selected a well weathered picnic table perpendicular to the surrounding green fence and sat down. Amanda followed suit.

“A third Wild Turkey, a third Jack, and a third dark rum,” Nora said as she held up her glass. “Three fluid ounces of throat-burning, ass-kicking delight.”

She took a sip, gasped and then let out a roar.

“Yow! Knock your socks off, sister.”

Amanda glared suspicious at hers.

“No chaser?”

“Don’t be such a pansy.”

Amanda frowned and raised the glass to her lips. After her initial sip, her eyes bulged and began watering up.

“God in heaven!” she gasped.

“Good, huh?”

“Good? What the hell is your definition of good?”

“This,” Nora replied.

She then dumped what remained in her shot glass down her throat. Amanda gaped.

“Good for what ails ya,” Nora said. “So, what ails ya?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you mean, what do I mean? I figure it’s gotta be Walt, so what’s up his ass? Or yours? What’s the scoop?”

Amanda dug a crumpled pack of Benson & Hedges out of the front pocket of her jeans and lit one up. She drew long and hard at the filter, sucked the smoke deep into her lungs and then tilted her head back to blow it up into the air.

“I’m not altogether sure,” she said at length.

"I knew it. What'd he do, stick it where it don't belong?"

"I'm not even going to ask what you mean by that. And no, he's just..."

"Just what?"

"Strange, I guess."

"Strange how?"

"I'd have to start at the beginning."

"Then why don't you do that?"

"Because I didn't figure on an interrogation when you invited me out for drinks, that's why."

Nora arched an eyebrow and pursed her lips.

"Gimme one of those," she said as she seized Amanda's pack of cigarettes.

Nora lit the cigarette, but she only smoked superficially, drawing a little smoke into her mouth before blowing it out again. A social smoker.

"It's too weird," Amanda said quietly between drags.

Nora furrowed her brow and then gently placed a hand over Amanda's.

"Tell me," Nora said.

Amanda sighed.

"He's got this new house, you know?"

"Sure, the gable front cottage. You told me."

"Right. Well. Just after he started moving in, we find this dark stain on the ceiling, on the hallway ceiling. Maybe about so big."

Amanda made a ring with both hands, estimating the original size of the stain.

“Okay,” Nora said. “Water damage?”

“That’s what we thought, Walt and I. But he had a plumber out and everything, there was no leakage, not there anyway. It definitely wasn’t a water stain, but it kept getting bigger. Getting worse.

“Eventually, it was dripping all over the floor. Thick, red gunk. Really nasty. And no source Walt could find anyplace. He checked the attic, dug up the paneling and everything. It didn’t *come* from anywhere. It was just there.”

Amanda paused to suck down the last of her cigarette. She stubbed it out in the black plastic ashtray on the picnic table. Then she fished another one from the pack and lit it.

“Are you fixing to tell me you broke up over a leak?”

“We’re not broken up. At least, I don’t think we are.”

“Okay,” Nora said with a flourish of her hand. “Continue.”

“Walt was getting sort of...I don’t know, *distant*, I guess is the word. Daydreamy, kind of off in his own world. And the stain kept getting bigger. Bigger and more gross—and the worse it got, the less Walt seemed to care about it.”

“You’ve never lived with a guy. I got three brothers, babe. Their dog could shit on the middle of the living room rug and the bastards still need to be told to clean it up.”

“Not Walt. He’s a tidy guy, really. Everything has its place. Maybe he’s even a little anal retentive. But that

thing up there, he was definitely more interested in it than repulsed. Then, the last night I stayed with him, I saw it...”

Amanda trailed off, bringing her brows into a tight knit and staring at the red glow at the tip of her cigarette.

“Saw it what? Spit it out.”

“It ate a roach, Nora. It actually reached out and *ate* a roach. I don’t know what that thing is, but it’s alive.”

“Nasty.”

“This from a chick who plays with spiders.”

“Spiders aren’t nasty. But that is.”

“It had, I don’t know, tentacles, sort of. Thin, wiggly little things.”

Amanda shuddered. Nora screwed up her face and narrowed her eyes.

“Tubifex,” she said plainly.

“What?”

“Hundred bucks says its tubifex. It’s a worm. A while back, some city workers found something in the sewer over in North Carolina, pretty much exactly like what you’re talking about. A huge, pulsing red mass just clinging to the walls of the sewer. Of course, everybody freaks out, calls it a monster. But it was just a worm colony.”

“A worm colony.”

“Yup. Still kind of gross, but perfectly ordinary. Walt’s got himself a pretty old house, I gather. Loads of mold, decaying wood, shit like that. Even without a leak

those old houses tend to pretty damp. I'll bet those little wormies are just snug as a bug in a rug in there."

"But it reached out and grabbed that cockroach, Nora."

"Worms, babe."

"Worms eat roaches?"

"Hell if I know. Maybe it only looked that way. Maybe the roach just got caught in the mass."

"Maybe," Amanda said uncertainly.

"Hundred bucks says it is. And here you're all heartsick over a bunch of dumb worms."

"You forgot about his attitude," Amanda reminded her.

"Did you—gee, I dunno—*talk* to him about that?"

"I screamed and ran out of the house after the thing with the roach."

Nora stared at her with wide eyes and an open mouth.

"You're an idiot."

"I'm an idiot."

"A colossal idiot."

"Huge."

Amanda's eyes flooded, but she laughed in spite of it.

"Worms, you say."

"Probably a hundred thousand of 'em, yeah."

"I thought..."

"You thought it was a monster, and that it was *controlling Walt's mind!*"

Nora wiggled her fingers at Amanda and whistled the theme from *The Twilight Zone*. Amanda slapped at her fingers with one hand and wiped the tears from her cheeks with the other.

“Oh, goddamnit,” Amanda croaked.

Nora smiled sweetly at her and stood up from the table.

“I’m going to go get another round. You can figure out how to fix this while I’m gone, all right?”

“Just no more Fuck Face for me.”

“Two Gorilla Farts, coming up!” Nora cried as she marched back into the bar.

Amanda shook her head and crushed her cigarette in the tray, half smoked. *Worms*, she thought ruefully. *What have I done?*

For the time being, she had forgotten what Walt said about the rats.

The face was vaguely human, but not quite. Humanoid. It had eyes, part of a nose—a bony septum, at least. There was a mouth replete with teeth that now looked longer, closer together. And, of course, the tiny, stubby fingers that perpetually wiggled at the ends of its nascent arms. All of it still dripping, ever dripping, from its glossy, blood red surface.

The mouth had been rhythmically opening and closing for some time now. Initially, Walt assumed it was conveying its insatiable appetite, a fact for which he

needed no reminding. Taken from another perspective, however, it also looked as though the creature was trying to speak. If he were a lip-reader, Walt might have determined the thing was attempting to say *ba, ba, ba*.

But that made no sense at all.

Puzzled, Walt dragged a stool from the kitchen to the hallway and silently observed his roommate for a while. He studied every minute detail of its skinless face and found that the longer he looked at it, the more human it appeared to become. He thought about its other end as well, the side that stuck out from the paneling in the attic. From that point of view, Walt discovered, the creature did not look human at all. Not remotely. Up there in the attic there was only the gargantuan pod, run through with twisting, branching arteries and every bit as blood red as the face on the ceiling below.

Walt definitely preferred the view from below. The constant movement of the mouth was somewhat disquieting, but he yearned to decode its silent message if one was to be found.

"I know you're hungry," he apologized. "I'm working on it. It's not as easy as it probably looks."

Ba, ba, ba, it mimed. It did not pause while Walt spoke.

"Are you in pain?"

Ahhhhhhg, the mouth moaned, finally breaking the rhythm. Its tongue hung slack, unable to support the desperate need to communicate.

"What do you *need*?"

Buhwuhhhh, the creature replied. Thick strands of saliva dropped out of its mouth and splashed against Walt's knees. He did not so much as flinch. He was far too preoccupied with uncovering the meaning behind the thing's plaintive groans.

"You'll never speak letting your tongue droop like that," Walt reprimanded it. "You've got it. Use it."

Bwuhhhhhhb.

Walt sighed heavily. He wondered which was going to require the most patience: his 9th graders in the fall, or the babbling entity in the ceiling?

"Bwub," Walt groaned. Then, standing and seizing the stool by its round, worn seat, he said, "Keep it up, then. You'll get there."

He dragged the stool back to the kitchen and decided to put some coffee on. *Let the old roomie ramble incoherently*, he thought. *I'll take my coffee on the porch and pore over some Coleridge.*

Indeed, the jabbering mouth went on with its gibberish, even as Walt shut the front door to block out the noise of it. He was halfway through *Frost at Midnight* when the creature finally began to make some sense. But Walt could no longer hear it, firmly focused instead on sandy shores and ancient, craggy mountains. He was dimly aware of the thing's ongoing chatter, but only in its capacity as white noise. If Walt was unable to shut out meaningless prattle, after all, he would never make it as a schoolteacher.

Still, the incessant reminder of the creature's proximity made it difficult for Walt to focus on the text in his hand. Every few lines, he found his mind wandering toward the troublesome question of keeping his new tenant in food. Sure, he could set any number of little traps out in the field behind his house, but even rabbits and moles were bound to catch on eventually.

Don't go in that field. You'll die.

There had to be other pet shops in town, but how long would it take before they figured out what he was doing and put a call in to the ASPCA? And would that amount to a misdemeanor and a hefty fine, or a felony with a prison sentence? Were Walt to go to prison, there would be no one to feed the creature then.

He set the book down on the rocking chair and took his coffee mug back into the house. He placed it on the kitchen counter beside the coffee maker, pulled the carafe out, and refilled the cup. Walt was about to turn toward the refrigerator for the milk when the next utterance of the increasingly troublesome thing in the hall startled him, causing him to swing his hand and knock the mug off the counter. It sailed across the kitchen, spraying steaming black coffee across the linoleum before smashing into the floor and exploding into a thousand tiny ceramic shards. Walt gasped, gulping for air. His heart slammed in his chest and his face flushed hot.

Had he heard what he thought he'd heard?

He craned his neck and cautiously tiptoed over the warm, wet floor, careful not to step on any of the sharp, jagged shards in his bare feet. When he reached the archway between the kitchen and the hall, he gazed up at the ceiling.

The creature's eyes darted toward him, wide and shimmering. It parted its lips, licked them with the tip of its tongue and then groaned.

"Blooooooood," it said.

Chapter Twelve

The sun sat at just the right angle to blast the porch with light and heat. It looked stark white, its edges blurry, wavering and indistinct. The sky in which it floated was the same hot white, and there were no clouds. The heat had burned them all up.

Walt sat still in the rocking chair, moving only to occasionally wipe the slick sweat from his forehead. The heat was getting to be unbearable, but he knew it was always worst at the end of the summer, right before the first cool of autumn finally swept in to relieve the suffering. He longed for a cold glass of water, but he lacked the initiative to get up and go get one. Besides, he promised himself he would not return to face *it* before he had a solution to their little problem.

He had spent the morning back in the field behind his house, looking for critters to catch and bleed dry for the thing in the ceiling. Unfortunately for Walt, his luck from the previous trip out there did not hold. The rabbit was a boon, an unlikely fluke that was not to be repeated in the near future. Nevertheless, Walt strode through the tall, scratchy grass and reeds, scanning every square foot of the field and coming up completely empty. The only life he detected at all consisted of the black birds in the treetops and the stocky man in a red plaid shirt shambling through the grass toward him.

The man raised a thick arm in greeting as he gradually drew nearer to Walt, who remained as still as a

mannequin. When only a few yards stretched between them, Walt could make out the man's grizzled, deeply lined face and the shock of thick white hair that seemed to burst out of his scalp like fire.

"Hullo there!" the man shouted.

Walt nodded and gave a weak wave.

"Dudley," the man said breathlessly as he closed the gap. "Dudley Chapel." He shoved a flattened hand out to Walt. Reluctantly, Walt accepted the handshake.

"Walt Blackmore," he muttered.

"Reckon you bought the Shelton house back 'ere, am I right?"

Dudley released Walt's hand and pointed. Walt followed the trajectory of Dudley's gnarled finger with his eyes. The older man was pointing at Walt's new house.

"Shelton?"

"That's right. Ron and Imelda Shelton, lived in that house...oh, I'd say twenty years if a day. 'Course, I been in mine for twice that long, but I'm just an old timer."

"I see," Walt said in a half-whisper. He didn't, though.

"Figure I'm your closest neighbor, on account of my place is three quarters of a mile up and over the hill, there." Dudley turned his pointing finger in the opposite direction. Walt squinted. "You can't even see the hill from here, can you? Yep, and I'm the closest."

Walt said, "Huh."

“Seems I heard some rumblings about your place finally getting bought up, but I didn’t come round to snoop. No sir, I’m just getting the blood moving. Don’t do it near often enough. And I seen you in the field here, so I says to myself, I says Dudley, you ought to go introduce yourself to that young man. So here I am!”

Walt fought to turn his genuine sneer into a forced and entirely counterfeit smile.

“Glad you did, Mr. Chapel,” he lied.

“Through them woods, over the hill; right at the bottom, that’s my property. Used to be a working farm, but that was parceled up and sold off years ago. Big red house with white shutters, can’t miss it.”

Walt nodded some more and wondered when the annoying old man was going to go away.

“Any time you get the hankering to drop in,” Dudley continued, “I’m sure me and the missus would be just as happy as clams to have you in for a sit.”

“I sure appreciate that, Mr. Chapel.”

“And knock off that Mr. Chapel stuff, youngster! I’m Dudley, you hear?”

A huge grin spread across Dudley’s face, exposing clean white dentures.

“I hear you, Dudley.”

With that, the old man sauntered back in the direction from which he came, stopping only to yell back at Walt: “See you soon, Walt!”

Walt sincerely hoped that would not be the case.

Hours later, Walt remained empty handed on the prey front and bereft of ideas. Dazed from the early afternoon heat, he drifted in and out of half-sleep, his mind wandering over the surface of the quandary but never quite landing on anything. He was nearly dreaming when a loud, high-pitching whine sounded in his left ear, snapping him awake. He wiggled his fingers in the ear, shoos the annoying insect away, but as soon as he returned his hand to his lap the bug returned, buzzing more frenetically than ever. Walt swatted with greater intensity and shook his head. The insect buzzed away. He let out a long, relieved breath and relaxeed. But he was fully awake, now. And the problem remained.

Walt pulled himself up and out of the chair, groaning and stretching. Somewhere in the far distance a dog barked. He wondered what time it was. Glancing at his wrist, he frowned at the white band of skin where his watch normally hung. He then narrowed his eyes at the mosquito further up on his forearm, frozen in place with its proboscis injected deep into Walt's skin. With his other hand, he slapped the mosquito, squashing it. A tiny red streak dotted with crushed bits of black was all that remained on his arm. Walt tilted his head, avoiding the bright sunlight as he raised his arm for a closer inspection.

He wished he had not squashed the mosquito at all. A little blood was not so much to give, not to a creature that required it to survive.

Walt smiled. He went back inside.

The knife was sharp, but not exactly ideal. A carbon steel tourne knife, it had been part of a set Walt received as a Christmas gift from his sister, Sarah, some years back. To his recollection, he had never used it. He was not even sure he knew what a tourne knife was for.

Sharp as the blade was, Walt longed for something more appropriate. A scalpel would be the thing, but where did one get a scalpel? An art supply store, he supposed. He was relatively certain he had seen such instruments at the art shop in Wisconsin, back in his college days when he decided to give painting a shot. But was it really worth the effort to drive clear into town for a blade that was probably no sharper than the one in his hand? Walt concluded that it was not. Then he began cutting.

The point of the knife made an indent on Walt's arm. The skin sank in, forming straight, thin wrinkles that arched down to the whitening nexus of the dimple. Walt applied a little more pressure and the skin broke. The indent welled up with dark blood more quickly than he expected. He pulled the knife away and watched the thick, round blob rapidly grow, burst and then trickle down the arm. He brought his brows together and sniffed. It really was not all that much. He was going to have to cut deeper.

Returning the point of the knife to the tiny wound, Walt pressed harder than before, digging a centimeter into the flesh. He winced at the hot, burning sensation of his skin being cut apart. It was even worse when he began sawing at the skin, rhythmically moving the knife through the flesh in a straight line toward his elbow. Now the wine-dark fluid really started to flow. Walt hurried, dropping the bloody knife on the counter and snatching up the transparent plastic bowl beside it. The blood ran down the deep canal he made with the tourne knife, welled up at the terminus of the wound and then spilled out in fat droplets into the bowl. When the flow slowed to an infrequent trickle, Walt set the bowl on the counter and squeezed the wounded forearm, forcing the blood out. The pain was sharp and intense; he groaned and whined throughout the procedure.

Behind him, in the hallway, a raspy voice moaned, "*Blood...*"

"I'm working on it, goddamnit," Walt grouched.

The wound stopped giving, its dark red edges already drying, scabbing up. He ran the kitchen faucet and held his forearm under it, hissing through his teeth at the agony of cold water on an open wound. When he could not take anymore, he turned the water off and turned his gaze to the bowl of blood on the counter. It did not look like much. Surely it had gotten more sustenance from the kitten and the rabbit. He pursed his lips, picked up the bowl and examined it. The viscous liquid sloshed against the side, leaving a thick red trail.

“Blood...”

Walt grunted. The straws were in the utensil drawer; he found the box and extracted one. He dropped it into the bowl, carried it to the hallway. He looked up. The pale eyes stared at him, the mouth sucked at the air. Walt hoped it would be enough. With one hand—the one not attached to a freshly cut arm—he cupped the bowl and lifted it up. The straw shifted, rounding the edge before settling against the dark, bloody lips. The creature’s mouth smacked at the straw, opening and shutting against its end as though it had no idea how such a thing might work. It gave a low, frustrated whine and then reached out with wobbling arms, curling its pudgy red fingers under the base of the bowl. Walt let go, startled and amazed by the new appearance of stubby little nails at the tips of the fingers.

The arms bent at the elbows, drawing the bowl close to the face. Its tongue darted out, flicked the straw away. It spun through the air, ejecting a couple of drops of Walt’s hard-earned blood in the process. The creature then extended its shiny tongue as far as it would go and commenced lapping up the blood. Soft moans of satisfaction accompanied the sharp smacking sounds of the tongue licking up the warm, fresh fluid. When it finished and the bowl was virtually clean, it dropped the bowl and let it tumble across the floor.

“Gooooood,” it rasped.

Walt gaped.

“Good,” he whispered in reply.

“More.”

“More? I can’t give you any more! That was my own blood, you know.”

“More!” the thing hissed.

“I haven’t *got* any more!”

The creature’s eye shimmered, its two black pits of a nose twitching. Thrusting its arms at Walt and snatching at him with its infant fingers, it roared.

“Give...more! MoremoremoremoreMORE!”

Walt quickly backed out of the hallway and into the kitchen. The tiny, misshapen hands continued grabbing at the air. The snarling, dripping mouth continued to shriek and roar.

“Christ,” Walt gasped. “Oh Christ Jesus.”

Walt kept moving backward, too afraid to turn his back on the hallway despite his relative certainty that the thing was well rooted to the ceiling. He felt something nudge his hip. He yelped and leaped to one side, knocking the stool that nudged him on its side with a noisy clatter. His eyes jumped from the stool to the hall. The creature was no longer visible from where he stood. Its dreadful, keening demands still filled the air, though.

“MOREMOREMOREMOREMORE!”

“Stop it!” Walt shrieked, slamming his open hands over his ears.

“MOREMOREMORE...”

“Shut up! Shut the hell up!”

“MOREMOREMORE! BLOOD! BLOOOOOD!”

Walt screamed, partly with terror and partly with rage. He started this, he was the one who fed it first, allowed it to develop and grow and become this screaming horror. He recognized his responsibility, but for what? Was he responsible for maintaining its terrible existence, or for annihilating it before the situation spiraled wildly out of his control?

His face flushed hot as he sank down to the cool linoleum floor, careful to keep his hands over his ears. He could still hear that thing's awful, incessant screeching, but it was at least a little better this way. Walt could begin thinking. He thought first about the kitten, the repulsive and depraved death that innocent creature met at Walt's own choosing. The rabbit—being the central point of his next thought—was not *as* bad. People ate rabbits. But not kittens. That was purely reprehensible, and now Walt worried that the guilt would hound him for the rest of his days. It could have been worse, he realized, much worse. And should he decide to permit this hellish monster to live, he imagined it very definitely would. This was only going to escalate, growing bloodier and bloodier, until...

Walt felt a shudder work its way through his body, terminating in his ear canals. Slowly, he slid his hands down. The shrieking seemed to have quieted down somewhat. That, or he was already growing accustomed to it.

Well, Walt thought, not for long. If it's got a face, it's got a brain. And a brain is no match for a claw hammer.

There was no question in Walt's mind that the creature felt pain. Nothing screeched like that unless it was in agony. But it did not know the meaning of agony, not yet. Walt pulled himself up to his feet, curled his hands into tight fists, and went in search of his hammer.

Chapter Thirteen

Thin strips of light sliced through the blinds, several of them jabbing into Amanda's fluttering eyelids. She opened them, blinked repeatedly. Tiny motes of dust floated where the yellow-white slats cut through, but not in the shadows in between. She narrowed her eyes at them, enjoying the warmth of the light but not its brightness. Rolling over on her side, she turned away from the light and faced the digital alarm clock beside the bed. For a fraction of a second, Amanda felt panicked; it was a quarter of ten, far too late in the morning to get to the shop on time. She relaxeed, however, at the faint memory of Nora's promise to get the store running alone.

"Sleep in," she had demanded last night. "Enjoy your coffee, read the paper, and call Walt when you feel up to it. Then call a goddamned exterminator. Those worms are pretty disgusting."

Amanda smiled, stretched, let out a quiet yawn. That Nora was a hell of a gal. Bat-shit crazy, but an incredibly loyal and valuable friend. While she gradually lifted herself up from the warmth and comfort of her bed, Amanda considered options for demonstrating her gratitude. Her usual thank you gift was a book, but that was out. You don't give a book to someone who co-owns a bookstore. Flowers were normally appreciated, but Nora was not really the type for things that required perpetual attention. Amanda knitted her brow and

shuffled to the bathroom. She peed, nearly falling asleep on the john.

Her mind felt sticky and sluggish. No decisions were going to be made until after the first cup of coffee, and maybe not until the second. She bobbed and weaved into the kitchen, like a punch-drunk zombie boxer, and set to getting the life-sustaining liquid brewing.

Walt, her sleep addled mind kept repeating. *Walt. Walt's worms. My apology.*

She only hoped it was going to be good enough.

The hammer did not feel particularly heavy in Walt's hand. It was the very same hammer he had been using for the various repairs the old gable front required, and it was perfectly adequate then. But now that Walt demanded a different job of the instrument, the job of bludgeoning a living being to death, it somehow felt slight, almost airy. As though he meant to kill a man with a feather.

Of course, this was no man he aimed to kill. And, despite his apprehensions regarding the tool in his hand, it was most certainly no feather. *He* certainly would not like to get smacked in the head with it. And that was just going to have to do.

Tightening his grip on the hammer's black rubber handle, Walt made a beeline for the hallway.

* * *

Her third cup of the morning—or, her first of the afternoon—went into her steel travel mug. With any luck, things would go well enough at Walt's that her fourth would be poured from his own stash of coffee. His tended to be a little fancier, anyway. Whole bean, dark roast. Stout stuff, but she liked it. Amanda swallowed a mouthful of her tepid store-brand brew and turned the key in the ignition. Then, with an anxious sigh, she began her journey to the boonies, to Walt's house.

Chapter Fourteen

The creature's face twisted up, its mouth curled into a savage sneer. Walt was not pleased to realize it was sort of nodding, a new development. It did not matter, not really. Not in the long run.

The top step of the stepstool was slick and shiny from the blood and slobber that rained down from the thing's snarling face and creepy little hands. Walt climbed up and raised the hammer, blunt end facing out. The creature sneered, baring its dull, white teeth.

It growled.

"I'm sorry," Walt said softly.

He reared back and swung the hammer. Its head crashed into the thing's brow, just above the left eye. Bone splintered, caved in. Blood sprayed Walt's face. It felt hot on his skin and tasted coppery on his lips.

The creature squealed, its eye sinking and drooping down. Walt yanked the hammer out of its head and sent it crashing back down, this time nailing the right temple.

"Aaaaauuugggghhh," the creature bellowed.

So much for *more, more, more*. Its speech center was probably obliterated. A few more whacks ought to do it. Walt ground his teeth together and slammed the hammer into the shiny red face again and again and again. With each impact, Walt groaned and the creature hollered and blood spurted all over the walls and ceiling and Walt himself. When he was done, there was nothing about the mass on the ceiling that might remind

an observer of anything even vaguely human. All that remained was a pulpy red mess, dripping with gory strings and jutting chunks of pink bone.

The creature, the *parasite*, was dead; Walt was certain of that. But his work was not yet done. There was still the matter of cleaning it all out, the ceiling and the attic, and then pulling up the paneling and knocking out the ruined plaster. He was going to rebuild it, paint it, make it good as new. And then try to forget all about the nightmare monster he had lived with that first week in the new house.

After he climbed back down the stepstool, Walt examined his front. He was splattered with blood from his chest and shoulders all the way down to his stomach. His arms were slick with the blood, and he knew his face had to be a sight, as well. But there was no sense in cleaning up now, not before the grisly job of scraping the carcass off the ceiling and digging out the rest from the attic. That awful pod.

Walt frowned. It would never have gotten this bad if he had not facilitated the process, exacerbated the problem. Unconsciously, he mopped his forehead with the back of his hand, effectively smearing blood with blood. He imagined he must look like Jack the Ripper, dripping with gore like he was. He gave a short laugh and resolved to at least wash his face before he progressed any further.

He had only just turned on the water in the bathroom sink when there came a pounding on the front door.

Walt jumped.

“No,” he whispered. “Not now.”

The knocking went on. Walt glanced at his reflection in the mirror above the sink. He might as well have taken a dip in a pool filled with blood and gore. His hands were shaking, the rest of him trembling almost as badly. Steam rose in white tendrils from the sink; he tested the temperature with one finger and quickly withdrew it. The water was scalding. Walt turned down the hot knob and turned the cold knob up. He quickly rinsed his face, checked it in the fogged mirror, and rinsed again. Leaving it to drip dry, he went out to the hall and paused.

There were only so many people among the list of possible visitors. For Walt, it broke down to Amanda, or not Amanda. If it was Amanda, then the blood that covered him was not necessarily the worst possible thing. She would be shocked, revolted even, but in the end Walt knew that she would be relieved. After all, it was the parasite that had been the problem all along.

On the other hand, it might be *not* Amanda. Someone else. In which case Walt could not possibly have cared less. Let them be offended, sickened, afraid. He could not please everybody all the time.

Walt steeled himself and strode toward the door. The pounding continued unabated.

“I’m coming!” Walt called out.

He drew the guard chain, unlatched it, and twisted the deadbolt before opening the door.

It was not Amanda.

Jarred from the bumpy drive down Highway 5, Amanda was relieved when Walt’s nice, flat driveway came into view.

Her relief rapidly dissolved when the strange green SUV also floated into her field of vision. It was parked beside Walt’s station wagon, all of its windows rolled halfway down, as if whoever was driving it did not expect to stay long enough to worry about it. Or, Amanda considered, perhaps it meant that they *did* intend to spend a spell with Walt, and they were protecting their big green gas-guzzler from the stifling heat.

She pulled in behind SUV, threw the stick into park, and then reconsidered. She had no idea what she was about to walk into, but the driver of the mystery car might require a quick escape. So she pulled back out, turned the wheel, and pulled in behind Walt’s station wagon. From that position, Amanda had a direct line of sight to Walt’s front door. It was standing wide open.

She narrowed her eyes, cut the engine. And she waited.

Chapter Fifteen

Tall and reedy, she looked like she might have been a rather pretty girl before a superfluous growth spurt stretched her past beauty and straight into awkwardness. Her straight brown hair probably went down to her rump when she let it down, but she wore it in a conservative protestant bun, instead. Complementing the bun were her enormous eyeglasses and drab brown attire: a long-sleeved blouse buttoned to the neck and an ankle-length skirt. She was the picture of Victorian temperance.

She was also offended, sickened and afraid, just as Walt predicted.

“Muh—Mister, uh...,” she stammered, her eyes wide and staring from behind the thick lenses.

“Ah,” Walt said with a forced smile. “Miss Stuben, isn’t it?”

She nodded, very slightly, in agreement that she was. Margaret Stuben, as she was originally introduced to Walt, the vice principal under Principal Byrne, the reigning honcho at Bowman High School and Walt’s new boss. Whether or not Miss Stuben was his superior too, he did not know. But in any event, his blood-spattered state was unlikely to do well toward a good impression on the established higher-ups. As Miss Stuben’s gaping mouth gradually closed into a disapproving grimace, Walt’s smile melted away. He recalled his first tour of the administrative offices at the

school, Byrne guiding him past Stuben's office, where a simple brass crucifix was affixed to the wall above her desk. Hardly the norm for public schools, but Walt asked no questions. He had gotten the distinct impression that where Beverly Stuben was considered, ignorance was bliss.

"What's happened?" she asked at length.

She now wore an expression of bemusement. But the fear had not dissolved completely. By way of explanation, Walt lifted his right hand, using the hammer to point behind him. It came up so fast that Miss Stuben let out a frightened squeal and jumped back, away from what she momentarily thought might be an attack.

Walt gave a nervous chuckle.

"I had...a little problem. Please," he said gently, stepping aside. "Come in. I'll just change my shirt."

Miss Stuben cocked her head to one side, a quizzical look on her face not unlike that of a puzzled dog. But when Walt disappeared beyond the kitchen, she resumed her harsh look and went into the house, leaving the door open behind her. She was halfway across the kitchen when a car rumbled onto the concrete driveway outside, too far away for her to hear it.

"We've...uh...been trying to reach you by phone, Mister...uh..."

Stuben stepped cautiously over the linoleum tiles, her flats making quiet scratching sounds.

"Mister, uh... *Walter?*"

At the end of the kitchen where the white linoleum shared a border with the dark hardwood that floored most of the house, Stuben stopped and wrinkled her nose. There was a sickly-sweet metallic odor in the air. It was not pleasant. Prepared to investigate further, she took a few steps into the dark hall beyond when Walt popped out of the shadows, naked to the waist.

Miss Stuben yelped.

"Oh," Walt said. "Sorry, I was just, you know."

He held up a clean white tee shirt, smiled, and then put it on.

"I wasn't exactly expecting company," he said. "Come on, let's go in the kitchen. I've got iced tea, coffee. I can Irish it up for you if you like. It is summer, after all; no school tomorrow."

Walt placed his hands on Miss Stuben's shoulders to guide her back into the kitchen. She wriggled away from him, her mouth a straight line of stern censure.

"I can find the kitchen, thank you."

"Yeah, of course."

"And a glass of water will be just fine."

"Okay," Walt said. "Water, then."

He gestured toward the stool that was upended on the floor. With an arched eyebrow, Stuben bent over and righted it before sitting down. Walt poured two glasses from the tap and handed one to her.

"Nothing's gone wrong, I hope."

"Wrong? Why, no. What do you mean?"

"I don't know. Like I didn't get the position after all, or something like that."

"Certainly not. It's only that we've called—well, *I've* called—for days. It just rings, so naturally..."

"You thought you'd drop by to make sure *I* still wanted the position."

Miss Stuben dropped her head a little, looking very much the child caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Walt laughed.

"No need to worry about anything like that," Walt assured her. "I've bought an old house is all. Wonky wiring. Nothing seems to work quite right, but rest assured—the phone company has been notified."

"Wiring," Miss Stuben dumbly repeated. "Well, of course."

"That's it."

"Then you can still be expected to attend the parent-teacher night? It's a week from Thursday, you know."

"I haven't forgotten," Walt lied. He had forgotten entirely. But watching the long-faced almost-beauty taking tiny sips from the edge of the water glass made him likely to say anything. She may have been a throwback prude and religious zealot, but Walt did not think she was too terrible to look at.

"You'll be in attendance, then? It isn't exactly compulsory, but I should think being a new teacher and all..."

"Yes, of course I'll be there. Wouldn't miss it."

His thick attempt at charm did anything but disarm Miss Stuben. Instead, she seemed to retreat even further into herself, setting the glass on the counter and tightly crossing her arms over her small bosom.

“Fine,” she said sharply. “In that case, would you please call the school the moment your phone line is working again? Mr. Byrne would like to know.”

“As would you, I’m sure.”

“You can leave the number with the secretary.”

Miss Stuben rose and revolved her shoulders, as though sitting on the stool had wreaked havoc on them.

“I don’t imagine I’ll have a new one. Do you have the old one?”

“It’s on file. Thank you for the water, Mister...uh...”

“Blackmore. Walter Blackmore. Call me Walt, though.”

“Walt,” she said with some unease.

With that, she turned toward the open door. Walt watched her as she strode toward it, forced to imagine the moving curves hidden beneath the awkward, draping folds of her conservative skirt. When the anguished moaning erupted behind him, his mind managed to ignore it completely, if only for a second. Miss Stuben, contrarily, spun around and stared.

“Are you all right?” she called to Walt.

“Hmm?”

“I, well...you...”

The moan went on, and despite her furrowed brow and glassy eyes, Stuben was gradually putting the pieces together. It was not *Walt* who had moaned, of course.

“Who is back there? What’s wrong with them?”

Walt’s dreamy look sank into an aggravated frown. His right cheek twitched. He was not sure if he was terrified or enraged. He was both.

The thing, the monster in his house, was still alive. Worse, it proved to have tentacles of another kind; an invisible variety that wound their way into all other aspects of his life.

“It’s nothing,” Walt grouched.

“No,” Miss Stuben insisted, striding back toward Walt. “There’s somebody back there. I thought I smelled something. What’s going on? What have you got going here, Mr. Blackmore?”

“Walt,” he corrected her.

“I think I’d better have a look,” she said plainly as she whisked right by him.

Walt stretched at her, seizing her by one arm and yanking her back like an impetuous child.

“Don’t!” he shouted.

“Let go of me!”

Miss Stuben snapped her arm free of Walt’s grip and marched quickly into the hallway. Then she screamed.

Chapter Sixteen

Amanda stabbed a spent butt into the ashtray with one hand while she reached for the pack with the other. It would be the third cigarette she smoked while waiting in Walt's driveway, but the chilling scream that sliced through the house put a stop to that.

Shrill and penetrating, the scream ripped through the air on its wild journey to Amanda's ears. She jerked, dropping an unlit cigarette on the rubber mat under her feet. For a moment she could not remember if she had lighted it or not; she folded over, fumbling for the smoke, only to find it cold. By then the scream had died out, but it still echoed in Amanda's head. Shrill noises like that always did when they stopped as abruptly as they began.

Yanking the door handle, Amanda threw her shoulder into the padded door, pushed it open and hurried to the front porch without bothering to close it again. Her feet clomped up the three wide steps, across the brief length of the porch and across the threshold. Now she heard panting—hard, strained breaths coming short and quick. And a sort of gurgling that reminded her of trying to talk to her sister underwater when they were kids.

Amanda paused, her own breath hot and sharp in her chest. Her mind was spinning out, orbiting around what seemed like a hundred conflicting thoughts and feelings. She felt stupid, for example, for the pang of jealousy she

felt upon first seeing the strange SUV in the driveway. Even when the scream validated her fear that Walt had a woman inside—a woman Amanda did not know—she recognized that there was something altogether different from a sexual dalliance going on inside. Something she supposed had to do with the house.

That, and the worms.

If there were any worms at all. Because Nora was only speculating, after all. She had never even been in the house, seen the grotesque thing.

She might not have any idea what she was talking about.

And, when the second scream erupted and was instantly cut short by a dull thump and a quick, sucking gasp, Amanda decided that Nora was full of shit.

She tried to convince herself that it was merely psychosomatic, or at the very least the result of shock. As far as Margaret knew, she suffered from no respiratory abnormalities, and so there was no practical reason she should not be able to breathe now. Still, no matter how much she defied her present circumstances in a concentrated effort to remain calm, her lungs just wouldn't work. The air was stuck.

Margaret's eyes bulged and she clawed at her throat in a desperate and pointless attempt to jumpstart her airway. Her head felt like it was contracting around her brain. The edges of her vision were starting to blur. And

looming above her, his face as still and inexpressive as a corpse, was Mr. Blackmore, the new ninth grade English teacher. Dangling at his side from a half-clenched fist was that hammer, dripping red. For the time being, the horror and agony of the young man gone mad was all that existed in the entire world. Not even the pulsing, babbling nightmare on the ceiling would register in her fear-addled mind in lieu of that.

Now, while she tried like hell to remember if Mr. Blackmore actually struck her or not, Margaret Stuben recalled the last cryptic thing he said to her.

“Don’t you touch her,” he snarled.

Her? Her who?

The one who was moaning, that was who. Someone in pain. Someone he wants so badly to keep secret he would...what? Kill her?

The blurry periphery closed in, and all around it the world darkened to an impenetrable black. Another voice, another woman, somewhere else in the house. The suffering woman? Somebody else? Another lunatic?

“Hello?”

Margaret’s eyes rolled back into her skull as the shadows washed over her.

Walt’s head snapped to the left and he felt a strangle jangle, like his brain followed the turn a little late. He tossed the hammer away to the right without hesitation.

It landed on the springy mattress in his bedroom without a sound. Dumb luck.

“Amanda?”

“Walt!” she cried. Her footsteps pounded across the foyer, through the living room and into the kitchen.

No time to panic. Got to think.

“Give me a hand!”

For the second time that day, Walt whipped off his bloody shirt and let it fall to the floor. He crouched down beside the prostrate form of Miss Stuben and hooked his hands into her armpits. Amanda appeared in the corner of his eye, rushing by the island counter. He heaved, jerking the tall woman hard and fast.

“The hell?”

“She’s not breathing.”

“Who is she?”

“Goddamnit she’s not *breathing!*”

Walt dragged the woman into the stark overhead light of the kitchen and released her. Looking up at Amanda with wide, wild eyes he gasped, “Tell me you know CPR.”

Amanda stood there in silence, staring and trembling.

“Amanda!” Walt shouted.

She remained frozen, stunned into inaction. Walt sneered and grunted at her. He then leaned over Miss Stuben, pinched her nostrils shut, and expelled a long breath straight into her mouth. Having never taken any kind of emergency resuscitation training (although it was required within his first year of teaching) Walt could

only imitate what he'd seen on television. He breathed into her lungs and pressed on her chest, on the bony part above her small breasts. Amanda had begun to whimper and moan, wringing her hands and saying, "Oh, oh, oh."

It did not work. Miss Stuben neither breathed nor moved at all. For all Walt knew, she was already dead. Which would not be the most terrible outcome imaginable, except that Amanda had come along to complicate everything so terribly. He tried one more round of breath and compression, and when that produced no results he laid a hard, open-handed slap across Miss Stuben's face.

Amanda gave a startled cry. But it worked; Stuben's eyes popped open and she wheezily gulped at the air.

"Oh my god," Amanda gasped.

Walt expelled a sigh of relief even as he acknowledged the fresh problem in front of him: if Miss Stuben could breathe, she could also talk. For now she was preoccupied with feeding oxygen to her bloodstream and rebooting her brain, but Walt did not expect it would take long before she got to blabbing.

"I'll call an ambulance," Amanda suggested, scanning the kitchen for the phone.

"Can't," Walt said. "Phone's dead."

"Oh shit, oh no," she mumbled.

"Calm down," Walt barked. "She'll be fine. She just needs to rest."

"Who is she? What happened to her?"

"Will you calm down?"

"I just want to know what the hell is happening here, Walt!"

Walt's face darkened as he rose to his feet, turning his glowering stare at Amanda.

"Be quiet," he snarled. "Be quiet, be calm, or get out."

"Walt..."

Miss Stuben coughed wetly. "Heh," she weakly gurgled.

"Ma'am?" Amanda called to her. "Are you all right?"

"Heh," she repeated.

"You're walking on thin ice, Amanda," Walt warned her.

"Shut up!" she barked back. Then, to Miss Stuben: "Ma'am, do you need an ambulance?"

"Heh...help..."

"Help?"

"Help..."

"Jesus. Jesus, Walt. What *is* this?"

"You're not supposed to be here."

"What does that mean?"

"Help me," Miss Stuben croaked.

Amanda stormed past Walt, toward the woman on the floor, but Walt grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her back.

"Let go!" Amanda roared.

"This is your last chance," Walt grimly warned.

Amanda drew her brows together and gazed incredulously at him.

"Last chance? Last chance for what?"

Her eyes wandered back to the woman on the floor. Tears ran down either side of her face, pooling on the linoleum beneath her ears. A runner of snot hung from one nostril. She was patently terrified.

“What have you done?” Amanda whispered.

Walt groaned. That did it. Now it was too late.

“I didn’t want this,” he said by way of apology. Then he threw an undercut punch that collided with Amanda’s chin and sent her crashing to the floor.

Chapter Seventeen

Nora sat on a rickety stool behind the counter in abject silence. No one other than her had set foot in store since she opened it two hours earlier, which was bad enough in itself, but Amanda hadn't bothered to come in, either. At 9:30 Nora rang her home phone, but she got the machine. At 10 she left a mildly concerned message. Now Nora was beginning to wonder whether her next message should be angry or worried.

This simply wasn't like her at all.

Although Nora and Amanda were equal partners in their faltering venture together, Amanda had always been the driving force behind it. It was her idea, and she always played the part of boss-lady. That was fine by Nora. She got to be independent and do whatever she pleased, but inevitably there was someone there to bear the brunt of the big calls and the bigger problems. They each had their roles and life on the career front was exceptionally comfortable, if not terribly profitable.

Less comfortable was the fact that Amanda—a woman who had never called in once since *In The Reads'* Grand Opening—was nowhere to be found. And Nora did not fully realize just how worried she really was until the bell over the door jangled and her heart nearly leapt out of her mouth. For a fraction of an instant, she'd thought it was Amanda, merely running late. It wasn't. A small, hunched over older lady wobbled in, instead.

She had clown-red hair and a sweet smile on her deeply creased face. Mrs. Kennedy.

“Good *morning*, dear!” she rasped cheerily.

“Good morning, Mrs. Kennedy,” Nora replied dejectedly. “Fresh out of dirty books already?”

Mrs. Kennedy tittered knowingly. She was one of the shop’s few loyal customers, a nice old woman with a penchant for borderline pornographic romance paperbacks. Without another word, she shambled to the back of the store and immediately began pulling volumes from the shelves. Nora sighed heavily.

Where the hell are you, Amanda?

They walked right into it. Both of them. Like flies stupidly setting down in the waiting maw of a Venus Flytrap. He was taking care of it, solving the problem. And in they walked, blind and hopeful, ignoring every creeping threat that lurked around them. Walt could hardly feel responsible. He was far from pleased about it, but there was no guilt. By god, he’d told Amanda to calm down. Now she was in the attic, her and that irascible Margaret Stuben. And she had no one to blame but herself.

Dragging the women up there had been no easy feat. He took Amanda first, still conscious if disabled by pain and tear-blurred eyes, and she kicked and fought all the way up. It was the work of an hour, all told, from the

bottom of the pull-down ladder to hogtying her with the orange extension cord.

"It's only temporary," he explained. "I wouldn't leave you like this."

She screamed and hissed and spat, mean as a cat. It broke Walt's heart to see her that way. He realized that their relationship had likely come to an end the minute Amanda went running out of the house that night (only days ago, but it felt like months), but this was another can of worms altogether.

"I hate you," she cried when Walt descended the steps again. "I hate your filthy goddamn guts!"

He gave a sigh and lowered himself down to the floor beside Miss Stuben—*Margaret*. No real need for formalities. Not anymore.

She too was conscious, but in remarkably worse shape than Amanda. It was all a ridiculous misunderstanding, of course. The nosy woman had taken it upon herself to waltz back into the forbidden hallway and got herself an eyeful of the very quandary Walt had been working toward eradicating all morning. How was he to know that the damned thing was still alive? He had certainly beaten it with the hammer enough to kill any ordinary creature, but then this monster was anything but ordinary. And oh, how she screamed. Like bloody murder, and like Walt had anything to do with it. By the time he caught on to what happened, those terrible red arms were stretching taut, reaching for her; a mouth full of chipped and broken

teeth chomping at the air. Even half-dead and beaten to a bloody pulp that thing was blood crazy.

Walt took up the hammer again, had it ready in half a second and slammed Margaret out of the way with his shoulder, giving himself the room he needed to bash the creature's head one more time. Looking back on it now, he supposed he must have shouldered her right in the throat, although he could not see how that was possible. She was taller than Walt. But it was dark; perhaps she was stooped over for some reason. Whatever the precise order of events, she went down gasping and Walt swung but he missed, driving the head of the hammer straight into the wall.

After that, pandemonium.

"Christ," Walt said as loosened Margaret's bun and ran his trembling, blood stained fingers through her hair. "You two sure caused a clusterfuck in here today."

Margaret moaned sullenly.

"Well, then. Up we go."

Had Margaret been the first to go, she would have been easy. There was no fight in her at all. But the ravages of hauling Amanda up there took their toll, and now his every muscle and tendon burned under the weight of Margaret's limp body and the pumping strain of climbing the ladder. They were fit enough ladies, the both of them, but Walt was in no great shape and he knew it.

Maybe I'll start working out, he blithely thought at the top of the steps.

He forgot all about that once he had the women arranged at a safe distance from the pod. He secured Amanda with a length of frayed rope left in the attic by some previous tenant. He loosened and retied the cord, this time just around her wrists, which he kept in back of her. She spit on his face when he was done, a whole mouthful of saliva she must have been working up for a while. He was a fairly good sport about it, though—he wiped his face with the back of his arm and smiled.

“Fair enough,” he said. “But just the once, okay?”

“Bring me a cigarette,” she gruffly demanded.

“Are you kidding?”

“No, I’m not. There’s a pack in my car.”

“Huh,” Walt said, mostly to himself. “The cars.”

“Nevermind that. Just bring me the pack.”

“You’ll burn my house down.”

“No I won’t. You can watch me the whole time.”

“You’d stink the place up, besides. You know how I’ve been on your ass about that since, well, since we met, almost.”

“I thought you were concerned about my health,” she rasped.

“That, too.”

“Sure.”

He blew a snort of air through his nose, half laugh and half rebuff. The pod pulsed and a hollow gurgle bubbled out of it.

“What has that thing done to you, Walt?”

“I was killing it. Before she came, before you. I was killing the fucking thing. Well, too late for that now.”

“Why is it too late?”

Walt did not have to answer her. Because across the attic, below the throbbing, vein-streaked pod, came a pealing bellow that chilled Amanda’s skin.

“BLOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOD!!!”

Her mouth dropped open as if she were powerless to keep it closed. Tears welled up in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. She croaked, trying to speak, but nothing more came out. Walt grinned knowingly.

“Everyone’s got to eat,” he said.

FALL

A Night in October

Chapter Eighteen

“You have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. Please check the number and try again.”

Sarah Blackmore-Hall dropped the receiver on the hooks and frowned. This was a new development. Until now, the line had just rung and rung, countless times until she ultimately decided to give up. Now the line was dead and gone, cut off by the phone company. The question was, did he fail to pay his bill or did he intentionally kill the service?

Neither sounded very much like her little brother, despite how little she actually knew about the man. Sarah knitted her brow and glanced over to Mitch. He was engrossed in the morning paper, the sports section as usual. So long as he did not actually bet on anything, she permitted him that much.

“Number’s disconnected,” she said.

“Hmm?” He did not bother to look up from the sports page. Some hulking young black kid in a numbered football jersey scowled on the front page.

“I said Walt’s number is disconnected.”

“Huh,” Mitch replied.

Sarah sighed heavily.

“Guess that means I’ll have to go over there?”

“Over where?”

“To Walt’s. Are you even listening to me?”

Mitch smiled bitterly and laid the paper down on the kitchen table.

“I am.”

“Momma’s sick.”

“I know she is.”

“Don’t you think Walt might like to know about it *before* she dies?”

“Nobody’s dying, Sarah...”

“Oh, I’m sorry...what is your medical expertise again?”

Now it was Mitch’s turn to sigh. He opened his mouth, about to reply, but thought better of it. He picked the sports page back up instead, burying his face in it.

“I’m going to Walt’s. Today.”

“Mm-kay.”

“It’s a long drive. Won’t be back until tomorrow at the earliest.”

“See you then.”

Sarah screwed her face up and glowered at the huge kid on the newspaper, the best substitute she had for her husband’s hidden face.

“Fuck you, Mitch,” she growled as she stomped out of the kitchen.

“Love you, too, sweetheart,” Mitch said quietly.

He smiled; the Razorbacks had whooped A&M at the Southwest Classic. He would have bet on that.

* * *

Walt would have been staring out a window, but the room did not have any. In fact, there were very few rooms anywhere in the building with a view of the outside world. One had the distinct feeling of being trapped in an underground shelter while the bombs dropped above. Nuclear fallout for a thousand years and trapped in this moldy, fluorescent lighted hell. At least Walt did.

The school was built in the mid-Sixties, so Walt had to wonder whether the Bay of Pigs had something to do with its design. He vaguely recalled the panic on nearly every adult's face in those days, but of course it came to nothing. And this was Middle of Nowhere, USA. Nobody was going to blow them up. Nonetheless, the only windows Walt had seen since beginning his first year as a teacher were in the offices and the hallways, the latter being small, frosted, and cross-hatched with ribbed iron rebar. Even light could not pass through. The classrooms were stark gray, no windows; the only light blaring yellow from the humming fluorescents among the rotting ceiling panels. If it wasn't a bunker, it might as well have been a prison. They had uniformed security guards waving wands over the poor kids at the door every morning, not to mention regular surprise room and locker searches. It was a wonder any actual teaching got done at all.

His kids were quietly scribbling in the sixteen page bluebooks he'd passed out at the start of class. The

month since the beginning of the school year was taken up by *Great Expectations*, a choice that elicited no dearth of moans and groans from the excitable fourteen-year-olds who faced him every day. Today, Walt waited for the bell to ring and then pointed to the question written in white chalk on the blackboard: *Discuss the significance of the novel's title—what are Pip's great expectations?* Walt raised a single eyebrow at the school district sanctioned essay question once the students set to it. His own expectations were meager at best.

At the conclusion of the hour the bell sounded again, and those students who remained awake groaned some more, having run out of time prior to completing their essays. Walt rounded the monolithic teacher's desk and leaned back on it.

"All right, pass them up."

Pages crinkled, paper shuffled. Soft murmurs gradually built to a crescendo of jabbering adolescent voices. Every other word *like*. Walt ignored them, stacking the bluebooks and dreading having to read them. As the last few students filed out of the room, Walt slumped in his chair and frowned at the cover on the top of the stack. The handwriting was barely legible; huge, looping letters intersected, invading one another's space. And that was just the kid's name. Walt grunted, looked up at the clock, and jumped at the portly girl obstructing his view of it.

"Oh. Hello, Alice."

"Hi Mr. Blackmore."

“Is there a problem?”

“I didn’t finish my essay.”

“I doubt very many of you did. It’s all right. I’ll bear it in mind.”

“Okay, Mr. Blackmore.”

He tried to force a smile, but his face refused to comply. So he dropped his gaze back to the unreadable garbage on the desk and waited for Alice to leave. Which she didn’t.

“Mr. Blackmore?”

Walt ground his molars together.

“Yes, Alice?”

“What do *you* think happened to Miss Stuben?”

“How should I know, Alice?”

“I didn’t think you actually *knew*. I was just wondering what you *thought*.”

“Well, I’m a teacher, not a policeman. It’s not for me to speculate, I don’t think.”

Alice squeezed her eyebrows together into an upturned point and let her eyes roam the drab room.

“I guess everybody figures she’s dead.”

Walt cranked his mouth up to one side and inhaled deeply.

“Well,” he mumbled, “let’s hope not.”

“She is. I know she is. She’d have turned up by now, someplace. Even if she just ran off with some guy. My sister did that, see? She just disappeared one night and my mom, she just cried for two weeks. A policeman told

my dad she was probably dead, but then she ran outta money and called from Tennessee.”

“There you go. Your sister was fine.”

“Not really. The guy beat the shit outta her.”

“Alice...”

“Sorry.”

“I wouldn’t worry so much. You should be focusing on your studies, getting good marks. Making friends and having sleepovers, things like that.”

Alice grinned sheepishly.

“You don’t know very much about teenage girls, do you Mr. Blackmore?”

Walt leaned back in his chair, studying Alice’s grinning face with a quizzical look.

“I’m a fat chick,” Alice said frankly. “I haven’t got any friends.”

Walt wanted to scream. This was getting out of control. He signed on to bore teenagers about Dickens and Shakespeare and (god willing) Chaucer, not to listen to their whiny perspectives on how the world was constantly turning against them. But Walt did not scream. He folded his arms on top of the desk and said, “You’re not *fat*, Alice.” (She was.) “And besides, no one is exempt from friendships.”

“I was right. You’re hopeless with girls.”

“Haven’t you got anything for Third Period?” Walt asked impatiently.

“Study hall. In the *cafeteria*, for god’s sakes.”

“Then you’d better get going.” He pointed at the clock on the wall. “You’re already late.”

Awkwardly, Alice turned to one side. She looked at the clock.

“Right,” she said softly. And then, as she passed into the dirty, ill-lit hallway, she whispered, “Farewell, monotonous acquaintances of my childhood...”

With that, she was gone. Walt smirked. At least one kid had managed to read the damn book, after all. Still, he could not have been more relieved at her departure. All those stupid questions, as though he was not bombarded with them enough on topics that actually mattered. *What happened to Miss Stuben? Was she dead?* Christ, no she’s not dead, he would’ve like to shout at her. What use would she be then?

Realizing that he was sneering, Walt flattened his mouth and returned his eyes to the indecipherable mess on the desk. He turned the cover over and grimaced at the first page of the booklet. It was still chicken-scratch, but he could make out the solitary sentence the student had managed to write in the course of an hour.

Pips a fagot.

Marking the inside cover with a thick red F, Walt moved on to the next bluebook.

Chapter Nineteen

She awoke to the terrifyingly familiar odor of musty wool and fiberglass, the attic's abundant insulation. Together with the nauseating coppery smell of the pod across the attic, it never let Amanda forget where she was. Not for one second.

She blinked, taking in the dim, dusty place where she'd been for the last few weeks. A narrow streak of sunlight sneaked in through the broken slats of a vent where the roof made an inverted V. The light was soft and white, but everything else was bathed in brown shadows. Amanda could hardly tell that the wispy layers of insulation were at all pink.

Reaching down to her ankle, she slipped her forefinger between the scabby skin and the cool steel shackle. The shackle was U-shaped with a thick pin through the stems, a lot like a halyard shackle but big enough to fit around Amanda's thin ankle. Walt had banged the clevis down on either side of the pin with the same bloody hammer that started the whole nightmarish ordeal. She supposed he must have gotten the supplies at a boating supply store of some sort. Margaret had one just like it.

Each of them was tethered to one of the attic's support beams. Five feet of steel cable connected the shackles to the posts, allowing them barely enough room to use the bedpan Walt provided with any sense of privacy. Not that the women required any privacy from

one another, not anymore. Margaret rarely ever spoke, but Amanda understood that a bond had developed between them all the same. To her mind, it would have been impossible to not have done so. They were sisters-in-arms, fellow sufferers in the same hellish agony. The only person in the world who could possibly comprehend Amanda's plight was Margaret, and the same was true vice versa. Accordingly, Amanda made up her mind before the end of the first week that she would not leave that house without her. No matter what might happen; if she got out of there, Margaret was coming too.

Amanda would rather die than leave Margaret alone to deal with that monster. Either of them, the creature or Walt.

Where the skin around her ankle wasn't scabbed, it was pink and raw. An inveterately violent sleeper, Amanda had yet to train herself to remain still at night, or whenever she slept, to prevent this kind of damage. Naturally Walt showed up with a bottle of peroxide or some Neosporin every few days. Applied it as gently and caringly as he could. Good old Walt. He was going to get his. Eventually. Somehow.

Margaret stirred. Sometimes it was difficult for Amanda to determine her level of consciousness. She spent about half the time floating somewhere in between sleep and wakefulness, the other half dead asleep. There were only brief windows wherein the shell-shocked woman was entirely cognizant of her surroundings and situation, and even then she did not usually feel much

like talking. Walt and his monster had really done a number on her. She had the same worn down raw spots and crimson-black scabs on her shackled ankle, but—poor Margaret!—that was among the least of her worries.

She was the one with all the cuts.

At first, he cut her every day. Not always the same time of day, but at some point between dawn and midnight, Walt climbed up the attic stairs with an art scalpel (a #16 according to the package in which it came), a plastic bowl and a first aid kit. As soon as the stairs shuttered down, Margaret would begin whimpering. She knew the pain was about to come, and she knew how weak she was going to be after Walt took her blood from her.

He started with her arms, making two inch incisions that covered the top of her left forearm, then her left, and then he moved on to the undersides. Two weeks went by like that, cutting and squeezing and draining the blood into that little bowl. After a while, Margaret's arms were a mess, covered with a dense network of furrowed scabs and leaking wounds. So Walt moved on to her legs. By that time he had ceased bothering to dress her again when he was done; he just kept her in her bra and panties. And, of course, the sundry bandages that mummified her arms, legs and, eventually, her torso as well. All of this started out white, but now her bandages and undergarments were stained red and brown. Margaret was in bad shape.

And she was getting weaker all the time. Walt was taking too much blood.

Amanda demanded—and later begged—that he split the bloodletting between them. Even after he'd diminished the regularity of the cutting to every other day, and then every few days, Margaret was fading away.

"Cut *me*, you bastard," Amanda cried. Later, it devolved into, "Walt, *please*. I've got plenty you can have. Give her a break."

But Walt was not having any of that.

"I'm not cutting you."

"Why not?"

"Because I love you."

Amanda cried when he said that. Not because she believed him, and certainly not because she felt the same way. She wept because there was no denying it anymore. Walt was crazy.

Margaret lifted her head, cracking her eyelids open to narrow, watery slits. Her shoulders lurched and she tried to hoist herself up on one elbow. It didn't work, so she lay back down.

"Good morning, Margaret."

That had started as an attempt at dark humor. Amanda would say *good morning* and Margaret, when she answered at all, would say *oh, sure* or *nice day for it*, something like that. One morning she just cried. Now Amanda meant it as a beacon of hope, as though by wishing her fellow captive a good morning and actually

meaning it there might really be a *good* morning on the horizon.

Today, Margaret only moaned.

As if by way of response, the pod gurgled. Amanda felt a shudder that terminated somewhere in the back of her throat. It just hung there, threatening to trigger her gag reflex and force her to vomit.

She remembered when she first saw it, when Walt moved in over the summer. It looked like a gigantic rotten egg then. So red it seemed black in the shadows. Repulsive. Amanda was reminded of century eggs, a Chinese delicacy she'd encountered in San Francisco, all putrid brown jelly on the outside and dark green bilge in the center. Since it had grown, however, the pod had taken on the appearance of an immense amniotic sac, translucent when the sunlight shone on it and filled with burbling black fluid.

Within the sac, floating in the dark liquid, was something else. Stalks, like marsh reeds, wriggling inside there. Sometimes they poked the walls of the sac, forming a veiny, fleshy tent. But they did not do that now. Now the two thick stalks only moved back and forth, kicking like legs.

Probably they *were* legs. It only made sense. Walt's horrid new friend was growing, and all with the help of Margaret's blood. Even he probably did not know where it was going to lead, what it would eventually become.

Or how much more of Margaret it was going to take.

"I thought it was worms," Amanda said quietly. *Funny*, she thought. *I haven't told her that yet.*

"W...worms?" Margaret murmured.

"Fucking Nora," Amanda cryptically replied.

Why hadn't she come looking for her? Perhaps she had, and Amanda was unaware. But she could always hear Walt down there, lumbering around, talking to himself, talking to *it*. Surely she would have heard any visitors, as well. Nora, the police, anybody at all. Anything other than *blood, blood, more blood!*

She glanced over at Margaret. Her eyes were closed, her chest rising and falling in the rhythm of sleep. In that way she was fortunate; the blood-loss weakness permitted her a sort of escape unknown to Amanda.

Soon, Walt would return. Yank the stairs down, climb on up. And since it had been a few days since he last cut into Margaret, she was probably about due. There was never going to be enough. Not until Margaret was dead. And perhaps not even then.

Amanda wrapped her arms around her bent knees and dropped her face between them.

"I hate you, Walt," she muttered between choking sobs.

Chapter Twenty

Dry brown seed pods crunched and burst under Sarah's feet as she walked the length of the parking lot from the convenience store to her car. The store was hedged in by tall Sweetgum trees, their green five-pointed leaves having died and fallen, leaving only the multitude of their spiky pods behind. She recalled their omnipresence back home, when she and Walt were small kids, making slingshots out of dry branches and rubber bands and firing the thorny projectiles at one another in the backyard. Walt called them monkey balls. Sarah preferred bommyknockers. They smelled sweet and fragrant in the spring, when they were green and fresh. Now, as an adult, they were nothing more than a minor annoyance, exploding with almost every step she took but otherwise entirely insignificant.

She carried a paper cup of gas station coffee, which was bitter with a weird aftertaste like pencil shavings. She did not mind, as long as it did its job and kept her alert for what remained of her drive to Walt's middle-of-nowhere burg. Once she slid back into the driver's seat she took a sip and burned her upper lip. It was going to have to wait. Maybe it would be cool enough by the time she hit Mount Pleasant. Setting the cup in the cup holder ahead of the gear stick, Sarah snatched the map from the passenger seat and unfolded it to her current position. As far as she could tell there were still a good two hundred and fifty miles to go. If she stayed on

course and did not stop more than once or twice, she might make it before dark.

She returned the map to the empty seat, started the car and stretched the seatbelt across her torso. The radio was worthless out there and she hadn't brought any tapes. It was going to be a long, quiet drive. Just Sarah and the hum of the engine and her own morbid thoughts.

Momma's dying and Walt doesn't even care.

Sarah's mouth curled up into a sneer as she backed up into the street.

He'll start caring when the will's read.

She turned the wheel, got herself in line with the crumbly macadam road.

I don't even know why I'm doing this. Who the hell moves away to a smaller town, anyway?

Sarah hit the gas and sped west.

Chapter Twenty-One

Walt shut the car door, saw that it hadn't closed all the way and bumped it with his rump. He glanced at the house, its angled roof pointing up. Alone in all the world but for the naked branches of a thousand trees silhouetted against the gray, featureless sky. A single black grackle flapped overhead, its oily wings silent against the cold autumn air.

Walt sighed and it came out in a white puff. He was not really alone in there. But for all the seething hate that seeped out of the attic he might as well have been. Even the insatiate beast, still hanging, dripping from the hallway ceiling, showed him nothing approaching affection, much less appreciation. Perhaps still bitter about the business with the hammer. But hadn't he more than made up for that by now? Surely he'd harvested ten gallons or more from that insufferable Stuben woman. (*Was she dead? Hell no, she's not dead.*) Still, all it did was moan and demand more, more, more, more.

Most of the time, Walt ended up angry with himself, wondering why he bothered. Just destroy the thing and be done with it.

But on occasion, frequently enough to keep him feeding the creature, he marveled at how fast it healed from the hammer attack, how increasingly human it looked. The arms filled out, lithe and muscular. The

fingers no longer stubby, grotesque little knobs, but thin and long. And those piercing, startling eyes.

In a strange sort of way, she was almost beautiful.

It. It was beautiful.

Walt shook it off. Wasn't the first time. Odd.

Briefcase in tow, he traversed the gravel path to the porch, climbed the steps, jammed the key into the lock. Inside, all was blissfully silent. No whimpering, screaming, or moaning. Walt smiled softly and gently shut the door behind him. If this kept up, he might even get to finish grading those awful essays. Maybe get some reading in.

"Guhhhh!"

His soft smile melting into a grimace, Walt shook his head. He did not think he was going to get off that easy. It was just waking up; he could tell. And it always woke up hungry, just like a newborn baby, screaming its head off.

Walt wished it really *would* scream its head off.

"Gahhhh! Wah... Wah.... WALT!"

"Yeah..."

"WALT!!"

He let go of the briefcase, let it drop to the floor. One corner of the briefcase struck the hardwood and chipped it, leaving a whitish, triangular indent.

"Shit," he hissed.

"WALT! WAAALT!"

"I heard you! I'm coming! Christ's sake!"

Walt groaned, an animal growl deep in his throat. The container in the refrigerator still had a little left in it, but he knew it was getting low. He doubted there was enough to quiet the creature, much less satisfy it.

He was going to have to bleed her. Tonight.

“Goddamn it,” Walt grumbled.

Jerking his head to one side, Walt heard his neck crack. It felt good. He jerked it the other way, but it failed to crack that time. The last of the evening’s luxuries.

“*Blood blood blood blood blood*,” it jabbered from the hallway.

Walt crossed the kitchen, opened the fridge and extracted the plastic container. Only the shallowest bit of Margaret’s thick, dark blood remained. He took it with him to the hallway, flipped on the bathroom light.

“*Bloodbloodbloodbloodblood...*”

“I’ve got it, I’ve got it.”

“Walt...”

“I’m here. I’ve got it.”

Walt popped the lid off and looked into the creature’s eyes. Its face was so much clearer now, so much more human. Still it had no skin to speak of, but its head was full and round, replete with an aquiline nose and a slender, angular chin. It smiled broadly and genuinely when their eyes met, flashing two rows of straight, white teeth.

“Walt,” it said through clenched jaws.

“You look terribly like a hungry old dog,” Walt said.

“Not nice.”

“Only quoting. Dickens said it, not me.”

“Dickens not nice.”

“It’s been said. Here.” He held up the plastic container and it accepted it in its shiny, bloody hands. “I know it’s not much.”

“Not enough. More.”

“I’ll get you more.”

“*Maaaargaret.*”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“So tasty, Margaret.”

“I should imagine so.”

“Bring her. Give me Margaret.”

“I mean to. But I’ve got to bleed her first.”

“*Blood cow,*” it said with a creaky laugh.

Walt’s face clouded. Only rarely did it advance an attempt at humor, but it was always chilling when it happened. The measured, throaty laughing did nothing to allay the unpleasantness of it. While Walt recoiled, backing away into the kitchen, the creature shoved its dripping face into the bowl, lapping the blood up from within.

He was readying his instruments when the bowl hit the floor and skidded off into the dining room.

“Bring her,” it said.

“Working on it,” Walt impatiently replied.

“NO!” it bellowed.

Walt raised his eyebrows and turned to look at it.

“What do you *want?*” he shouted back.

“HER!”

“I told you, I’m working on it!”

“NO MORE BLOOD! FLESH! MEAT! MEEEEEEAT!”

Craning its neck to face him directly, the thing resumed its clenched-teeth grin. Its eyes bulged wide and its nostrils flared. Walt leaned back on the island counter, afraid that his knees might give out at any moment.

“Oh my god,” he rasped.

It had not taken long for its head to heal from the blows of Walt’s hammer, and as soon as the teeth grew back it started to talk. Nonsense words to begin with; baby talk. Then, the same as before: *blood* and *more*. When it was sated, it was silent. That was not often.

As its features developed and the head separated from the stringy red mass on the ceiling, the creature’s voice softened and its vocabulary improved. It learned Walt’s name and called to him frequently. It made macabre jokes and grinned like Mr. Sardonicus. Or Hugo’s Gwynplaine from *The Man Who Laughs*.

Never had apparition more frightful grinned in nightmare, he thought grimly.

The time had come for Walt to start asking questions.

“What are you?” It was the most basic question, the question from which all future determinations would be based, Walt supposed.

“I am me.”

“And what is that?”

“Hungry.”

Always it spoke in circles, avoiding answering any question in a direct manner. Always it came back to the matter of blood.

“Where did you come from?”

“Here.”

Never an answer.

“What is your name?”

“No name.”

“You haven’t got one?”

“Give me.”

“Give you what? A name?”

“Yessss.”

Thus Walt began thinking of the smiling monstrosity in his house as Gwynplaine.

“Margaret. Margaret, wake up, dear.”

She cracked her eyes open, peered through the sleep gunk and saw only indistinct colors mixing together in the vague shape of a face. But she knew who it was.

“You’ve got to take this,” he said.

A cool glass touched her limp hand. Cool and dripping with condensation.

“What’s...”

“It’s medicine. Good for you.”

“Don’t drink that, Margaret!” Amanda shouted from someplace near. She sounded as though she was in a tunnel. But everything usually did anymore.

“Shut up, it’s just water.”

“Don’t drink it. Don’t.”

He groaned and gently brushed her cheek with his fingers.

“Here, sit up,” he said. “It’s only sleeping pills.”

“You woke me up for sleeping pills?”

“You weren’t sleeping, just dozing in and out. You’re not very well.”

“Hmm.”

“It’s okay. I just want to help you rest. Get better.”

Margaret propped herself up on an elbow, but it buckled and she crashed back down on the panel. He reached down and lifted her up, giving a little grunt. He leaned her up against the support beam, the one to which she was chained. Then he took her hand, uncurled the fingers and lay a handful of pills on her palm.

“Pills?”

“They’re hers. Amanda’s. They’re safe. You’re only going to sleep for a while. A nice, long sleep—wouldn’t that be nice?”

“Hmm.”

“If it’s mine, you can’t take more than two,” Amanda called out from her tunnel. “Much more than that is really dangerous, Margaret. He’s probably trying to kill you.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sakes, will you be quiet? Why should I kill her now? It’s been five weeks! I’m trying to *help* her!”

“You’re a liar!” Amanda squealed. “A liar and a murderer and a piece of dog shit!”

“I’ve never lied to either of you, nor have I killed anyone. You’re still here, aren’t you? Jesus, I haven’t even bled *you*. You should be thanking me.”

“Thanking you? Thanking *you*?”

“Yeah, all right. Maybe not. But please, be quiet.”

Margaret swayed a little, feeling the weight of the pills in her palm and trying to guess at how many were there. Eight? Twelve? She couldn’t tell. The shouting match he was having with Amanda was too distracting.

“It’s okay, Margaret. Ignore it, she’s just upset. Take your medicine.”

Without giving the issue another thought she popped the entire handful into her mouth. He quickly pressed the wet glass in her hand, helped her raise it to her lips. She drank greedily, gulping the clean, cool water and letting it wash the pills down her throat.

“There you go,” he cooed. “That’s a good girl.”

“Margaret, no!” Amanda cried.

“S’okay” Margaret answered her after a satisfied gasp. “M’gunna sleep now.”

“That’s right,” he said, stroking the back of her head. It felt nice.

“Sleep now,” she murmured again.

She closed her eyes and felt the floor go soft, breaking apart into gentle waves that rolled beneath her. Floating on top of them, she let them rock her to sleep. As consciousness evaded her, Margaret tried to remember who he was, this nice man who took such good care of her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

First she saw the blue sign on the roadside: GAS FOOD LODGING. Under the headers *gas* and *food* appeared the same name: BERT'S CAFÉ. *Lodging* was curiously vacant. The sign was stippled with buckshot.

Sarah hated the country.

She noted the exit number and, when the off-ramp loomed on the horizon, flipped on her turn signal. It was time to refuel both the car and herself.

The building stood alone and looked abandoned. From the shape and color of the structure, it was obvious to Sarah that it had once been a fast-food joint, long ago, that had since been converted to suit Bert's needs. Whoever he was. In front of the dingy restaurant a cracked and greasy parking lot stretched out to the service road. Two ancient fuel pumps were erected in the middle of it, the kind that had the scrolling numbers. Sarah pulled up to the closer of the two and jammed the nozzle into her gas tank. While the numbers slowly rolled off with an irritating clicking, she gazed at the field surrounding the property. It was nothing more than infrequent patches of brown and yellow grass that was occasionally interrupted by a copse of stubby, diseased hickories. Their naked branches clawed at the gray sky and looked like veins. Far beyond that stood a reddish brown farmhouse. Its roof was caved in.

The pump sputtered and clicked for the last time. Sarah tapped the nozzle and returned it to the pump. The gas smelled astringent in the cool October air.

After moving the car to a parking space directly in front of the restaurant, Sarah went inside. Country-western music squawked tinnily from a pair of banged up speakers suspended from the ceiling. With the exception of the green silk fauna placed strategically throughout the dining area, everything in the place was either brown, yellow or orange. Cracked plastic booths, ageing formica tabletops, and even the once-white walls subscribed to the motif.

Sarah frowned.

A hefty middle aged woman in a wrinkled waitress uniform (yellow and brown, of course) looked up from the table she was wiping down.

"Take a seat," she drawled. "Any one you want."

"I got some gas," Sarah said.

"I'll put it on your ticket," the waitress said. She sounded annoyed.

Sarah strode past her and quickly located the cleanest looking booth, which was not particularly clean. She scooted into it anyway, nudging her purse between the wall and her hip. A greasy laminated menu was propped up against the adjacent window that looked out over the dead field. Sarah picked it up and scowled when her thumb slid across its slick, oily surface.

"What'll you have?"

Sarah glanced up at the waitress, who had her ticket book open and ready. She did not smile; her face was like granite. *Weren't service people supposed to be polite?*

"Coffee," Sarah said. "Aaaand....the club, I suppose."

"Coffee and a club," the waitress mumbled as she waddled off. She did not bother to write it down.

Sarah knitted her brow. She guessed that when you're the only game for miles and miles, you can afford to be undiplomatic.

Placing the menu back on the window, she wiped her greasy fingertips on her skirt and scanned the grimy environment. An older guy with a bushy white mustache and a mesh trucker's cap sipped coffee at a table by the restrooms. He was reading a dog-eared paperback Western. *Blood River*. Sarah blew a puff of air through her nostrils. *Funny*, she thought. *Doesn't look literate*.

The song changed—another warbling country-western tune—as the trucker closed his book and stood up from his chair. He dropped a few crumpled bills on the table and moseyed on out.

Now Sarah was alone. It felt eerie to her. She did not think she'd ever been all by herself in a restaurant before.

Momentarily the surly waitress came around with a mug of coffee. She set it on the table without a word and wandered back to the kitchen. No sugar, no creamer. Sarah sighed. She started sipping at it anyway.

She was in mid-sip when a steel serving basket clanged against the tabletop in front of her. Sarah jumped, spilling a dollop of hot coffee on her blouse. She gaped at the serving basket; it was full of sugar packets and little plastic cups of creamer. Then she glanced up at the stubble-faced man who put it there.

He was short and stocky, with pale gray eyes and a greasy brown pompadour. When Sarah's eyes met his, he smiled, displaying crooked, yellow teeth. Smoker's teeth. She could smell the nicotine all over him. He was like a living ashtray.

"Here you are," he boomed. "Service with a smile."

Raising one eyebrow, Sarah said, "Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

She expected him to go away then, back to wherever he came from. Instead, he slid into the booth across the table from her. Sarah rolled her eyes.

"I'm *married*," she said sternly.

"That a fact? A great institution, or so I've heard tell. Never got hitched, myself. Always on the move, don't make for a good marriage."

"That's very interesting, but if you don't mind...?"

The man lifted his brow solicitously, waiting for Sarah to complete her request. She sighed again.

"Don't mind what?" he asked at length.

"Are you serious?"

"Not usually. Got me a great sense a humor. I got 'em laughin' all the time."

Sarah shook her head, astonished. This guy just couldn't buy a clue.

"Look," she growled. "I don't particularly feel like making any new friends today, all right?"

"Aw, that's too bad." Once more, he flashed his tar-stained grin at her.

"Which means I'd rather be alone."

"You mean to tell me a pretty lady like you ain't waiting on somebody to join her? Now that's a damn crime."

"That's right," Sarah barked before the gravity of the man's question hit her.

Was he just fishing to find out if she was traveling alone?

And did she just walk right into his little trap?

Shit.

"What a shame," the man went on. "Good thing I came along then, ain't it?"

"I sure wouldn't say that."

"No?"

"Hell no."

"How come?" He pouted dramatically.

"Because I know an asshole creep when I see one, and you just so happen to be an asshole creep."

In an instant, the man's playful face contracted into a savage scowl. Icy needles danced up Sarah's spine. He took in a deep breath, like he was about to lay into her.
Here?

The kitchen door swung open and the waitress came waddling out with a brown plastic tray balanced on one hand. Atop the tray was a single plate, and on the plate was Sarah's club sandwich.

She did not suppose anybody in the history of the world had ever been so happy to see a roadside lunch.

"Club," the waitress said as she transferred the plate from the tray to the table.

Sarah looked up at her helplessly, her eyes wide and pleading. The waitress twisted her mouth up and turned to face the man.

"King, you buggin' this lady?"

"Who's bugged?" King pleaded. "We're just talking."

"He's talking," Sarah cut in. "I'm bugged."

"Crissakes, King. Leave her be. You're such a dumb shit sometimes."

For a second King looked genuinely offended. But then he held up his hands, palms out, and a smile spread across his hairy face.

"Just being friendly, ladies. No harm done."

With that, he scooted out of the booth, flattened out his flannel shirt, and crossed the dining area to another table where he sat down. Sarah let out a breath she had not realized she'd been holding in.

"He don't mean nothing," the waitress assured her as she ripped off the ticket and dropped it on the table. "King's a piece of work—he's an *asshole*—but he don't mean nothing."

"Thanks for rescuing me," Sarah said softly.

The waitress smiled for the first time since Sarah came in. "No charge," she said.

After that, the waitress tottered out the front door, extracting a pack of cigarettes from her apron pocket along the way. Sarah watched her go. Then she looked over at King. He was looking back at her. And still grinning. Sarah glowered at him and turned back to her lunch.

And while she ate, King stared at her.

Five or six miles further down the road, Sarah gave up on trying to find a tolerable radio station and turned it off. The sandwich felt good in her belly but the coffee was making her a little jittery. She wished she had a good book on tape, something to calm her mind.

She was nervous and upset from the incident at Bert's Café, still angry with her brother, and tired of being on the road. And now, looking up at the rearview mirror and seeing a pickup truck barreling down on her with its high beams on, Sarah felt scared, as well.

King.

What a ridiculous name.

The ridiculous name of the guy who is going to rape me and murder me.

Sarah blasted past a stop sign without so much as slowing down. The red octagon only registered in her peripheral vision in the instant before she passed it. There was a sharp intake of breath that accompanied the

quickenings of her heartbeat. Out there, in the middle of nowhere, a cop would count himself fortunate for the opportunity to pull over some city woman just passing through; anything to interrupt the monotony of small town police work. She considered whether or not it would be a boon to get pulled over with the truck speeding up behind her, catching up to her. She was undecided. For all Sarah knew, King *was* a cop. Or was in with them. Fishing buddies or some dumb hick shit like that. Out there in the middle of damn nowhere, where no one was really accountable for anything they did, anything could happen.

Sarah swallowed hard and glanced up at the rearview mirror again. There was no truck; only vacant road stretching on forever behind her. Probably it never was King at all. Just some redneck kids out for a thrill ride. Never even noticed her.

And luckily for Sarah, her transgression with the stop sign went unseen. After five minutes passed without the alarming presence of flashing bubblegum lights or threatening high beams in her rearview mirror, her breathing and heartbeat began slowing to relatively normal rates.

Only fifty miles left, she reminded herself. Less than an hour before she expected to be pulling into Walt's driveway (if he had one). It was about time to start preparing what she was going to say to him, and how she was going to say it.

You were never around so you shouldn't get a dime from her.

Sounded fair enough to Sarah, but hardly the right foot to start out on. Besides, Walt did not even know that his mother was ill, much less on death's doorstep. He *should* have known, he *should* have been aware of all pertinent goings-on in his own family, but he had long ago made his choices and stuck to them. Walt was never the black sheep by nature, but by self-design. Sarah found that disgraceful, and it was the subject of many an argument between her and Momma. She loved her boy, as mothers are wont to do, and thus she consistently failed to see what a perennial prick he was. She would always cry a little when Walt missed Mother's Day or went three years in a row failing to remember her birthday, but she always forgave him. Not that the bastard ever apologized. The forgiveness was implicit.

Now that Sarah was on a roll recalling every sordid detail of her unpleasant experiences with her brother, she tried to remember exactly how long it had been since they last time they spoke. She decided it had been thirteen months, on the phone. Sarah had not actually seen him in more than four years. Over the entirety of Walt's twenty-some years, they never got along. And not getting along very often amounted to violence and anger. He would never expect so serious an enemy to darken his doorstep unannounced.

He was in for a surprise.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Even with the shiny silver strip of duct tape firmly affixed over her mouth, Amanda managed to scream. She watched with bulging eyes as Walt dragged Margaret's inanimate body across the attic floor and down the stairs. It was not until they were gone from her view that the muffled screaming commenced.

Walt's face flushed hot. Amanda knew the house was miles from the nearest neighbor, and so her carrying on could accomplish nothing apart from annoying him. He was on the verge of scampering back up to the attic where he would threaten her with the same fate should she continue making such a scene. But Gwynplaine could not wait.

"Hurry," it rasped. "Quick, Walt. Quick."

Its mouth hung open, its fingers wiggling with eager anticipation.

"She's here," Walt said.

"Meat, Walt. Quick—the *meat!*"

Walt blanched. He had not expected to do much more than bring Margaret to Gwynplaine.

"I—I can't," he stammered.

"You must. I'll die."

"It's murder!"

"No! It is meat! Only meat!"

"But what if I'm found out? What if I'm caught?"

"You won't," it said matter-of-factly.

"You don't know that!"

“I will protect you. Always.”

Once again its mouth spread into a ghastly grin, the origin of its apt name. It was a sardonic grin, appropriately. *Ricus sardonicus*. The Hippocratic smile.

“Sure you will,” Walt replied.

“Please.”

Walt looked at Margaret, stared at her gaping mouth and sleeping eyes. She already looked dead.

“*Pleeeeeeease*,” Gwynplaine begged.

Walt slowly filled his lungs and held it for moment before letting it out just as gradually.

“What do you need me to do?”

Gwynplaine sneered and chuckled.

“Butcher it.”

Amanda blew hard through her nostrils, ejecting thick ropes of mucus onto the floor in front of her. As much as she was crying, she had to be careful to keep her airway clear. Her nose was all she had at the moment.

If there was anything to keep her from snapping completely, it was the knowledge that Margaret never woke up. Amanda waited for bone chilling shriek of agony, but it never came. She heard the wet, crunching noises of a body being rent apart, just below her at the bottom of the attic stairs. Walt would murmur (*oh God oh Jesus*) and that unnatural monster would cruelly respond (*yes oh yesss give me a taste Walt put it to my lips the meat the savory meat*). All the while, whack

after sickening whack, Margaret came apart and Walt fed her to the creature, piece by piece.

Amanda had nothing apart from sheer willpower to prevent herself from vomiting. If she did that, she was done. The puke would wash back, flood her lungs, and she would drown in her own sick. So she cried. It was something real, it was necessary and natural and she could focus completely on that and nothing else.

Yet still the nauseating *thump* of some cutting implement meeting flesh and bone, splitting it and separating it from the whole, went on. Still the monster moaned in ecstasy while Walt whined and muttered. He was in a sort of agony, but Amanda could not reconcile that with the cruel, heartless Walt who stole Margaret's blood all those weeks and kept them both captive in the attic. Nor could she reconcile the Walt who lived in the gable front house on the outskirts of town with the man she had dated for the preceding three years. That Walt was a gentle man who never raised his voice or grew especially angry, much less resort to any sort of violence. He was eccentric, to be sure, but in an endearing and even sexy way. The quiet, introspective bookworm whose mind was apt to wander over any number of esoteric literary subjects, regardless if he was talking *to* her or just idly rambling. The man she loved more than anybody else in her history.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

"Oh my *god*," Amanda heard him moan.

Somehow, she could not make herself believe that this was entirely his fault. It was that thing, that monster growing in the attic, through paneling and past the hallway ceiling below. The thing Walt had started called *Gwynplaine*, whatever that meant. Its name, she supposed. As if it deserved one.

She was not exactly inclined to believe in anything like mind control. Despite the desperate fears she'd expressed to Nora. But then Nora was wrong, it wasn't worms at all. It really *was* a monster. And if Amanda could believe in monsters, then the door stood wide open. Maybe it was a ghost returning from the Great Beyond, or an alien life form from millions of light-years away. Maybe it was a demon from Hell.

But then, Amanda did not believe in hell. Not even now.

She could not afford to.

Thump. Thump.

Something went *splat*. Walt groaned plaintively. He sounded as though he might be crying. Which was met with throaty laughter from the monster. From Gwynplaine.

"Give it to me!" came the gravely, androgynous voice. Amanda shuddered.

This was it. Margaret was dead; there was no question about it. Now she had only herself to consider.

She had to find a way out.

The rug Walt laid down in the hall did little to prevent the spatter he'd hoped to control. Blood coated the walls, dripping down in thick crimson rivulets from the broad splotches that spotted the hallway. He, too, was covered in gore; he now wished he'd had a smock and some goggles before he began the impossibly distasteful work of dismembering a living human being. To boot, his shoulders ached from the strain of chopping with the cleaver. It was made for splitting bones, though certainly not of the human variety. Nevertheless, it had done the job. Margaret was reduced to shiny red slabs of meat, all but the organs, hands, feet and head.

Her abominable, still staring head.

Walt reached over, suppressing a gag, and pressed her eyelids shut with the tips of his fingers. Something warm splattered against the back of his neck and he flinched, drawing back and looking up.

It was only Gwynplaine, of course. A very messy eater, that thing. It was drooling blood all over the place as it rent Margaret's raw flesh apart with its teeth.

Walt scooted backward, crab-like, toward the kitchen.

Gwynplaine growled, its mouth full of dripping, blood-raw meat.

"Thay," it said. *Stay.*

Walt's face screwed up into a horrified sort of pout. He could barely stand looking at it anymore, at least for the time being. It held the huge slab with both hands and sucked the warm fluid from it. This was the sizeable

chunk Walt carved from Margaret's left thigh. Gwynplaine had already eaten the right one.

"I can't," Walt complained.

"Not...done...yet," it said between slurps and nibbles.

Walt slid up the wall, not trusting his knees to support him on the way to standing. Almost involuntarily, he looked at the repulsive mound of butchered human flesh on the area rug beneath him. He immediately squeezed his eyes shut and muttered, "Oh, god."

"No god!" Gwynplaine cheerfully declared. "Only meat. Now. I must *grow*."

Walt whipped his head away; away from the grisly sight of what he had done, away from the smell of human gore in his nose and the taste in his mouth. He retched, unable to hold it back any longer. His arms windmilled and he sprinted through the kitchen toward the double sink. He made it, but barely.

Gwynplaine laughed uproariously while Walt regurgitated into the stainless steel sink.

The chilling laughter, however, was abruptly cut short by the loud bang in the attic, like something very heavy had been dropped from a great height. A bowling ball or a barbell. Neither of which Walt owned.

It was Amanda.

Walt spit a mouthful of chunky saliva into the sink and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Scowling, he made his way back to the attic stairs.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Holding the shackle steady with one hand, Amanda pried at the clevis in the pin with the other. The tips of her fingers turned white as she dug them into the bent piece of metal, but it was to no avail. It had not budged at all. Still she kept at it, though, digging at it in what she knew was a futile attempt to free herself from the shackle. Her forefinger slipped, but she held tight. This turned out to be a poor choice—her fingernail caught the end of the clevis when the finger continued to slide, ripping half of the nail off completely.

Amanda yelled as her eyes filled with tears and her cuticle welled up with blood. It hurt like hell, a hot and stinging pain, but she was not about to give up yet. She popped the bleeding finger into her mouth and sucked at it while maneuvering her ankle around in the shackle. There just wasn't any way out of it.

Keeping the seeping finger in her mouth, Amanda struggled upward to a standing position. Her knees almost buckled and her head felt light. She gave the steel cord a yank, pulled it taut. A few tiny splinters broke away from the support beam where it chafed.

Amanda said, "Hmm."

She gave another, harder yank. And then another. More splinters came off. She could still hear Walt crying and arguing with the creature, but she did her best to ignore it. Instead she focused her attention on the beam. One more yank, good and hard, and then she'd try

scraping the cord back and forth to whittle the wood away. She hoped the roof did not cave in if she was successful. At least, not on top of her.

Amanda took two steps closer to the beam to provide a length of slack. Then she kicked her leg away from it.

First she heard the snap; a crack, like a stalk of celery pulled apart. Then she felt the burning agony in her ankle. Amanda went down, crashed against the beams and landed facedown in pink insulation. Something off to her left smashed against the paneling. Something tall and black. A candlestick, maybe. She let out a pained whine.

Eeeeeee.

When she bent at the waist and craned her neck, she could see what became of the ankle. The foot was perpendicular with the leg, jutting out to the right at a ninety degree angle. The bones had snapped right in half, fibula and tibia both.

She tried to scream, but nothing came out.

And then came the pounding footsteps below.

Walt was coming to investigate.

He swept up the cleaver on his way, failing to register how sticky the handle was. Everything was sticky that way, now. Margaret's blood was everywhere. So much of it, it would never come out. Walt would have to burn the house to the ground to get rid of that much blood.

Skidding over a broad slick on the hardwood floor, Walt regained his traction on the area rug, leaping over a glistening mound of human meat. He rounded the drop-down steps to their front and scrambled up. Above and behind him, Gwynplaine hissed and tittered.

Popping up through the attic door like a prairie dog, Walt narrowed his eyes. He scanned the gray shadows, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, looking for Amanda. His heart thudded in his chest. He climbed all the way up and crouched, ready for anything, the bloody cleaver gleaming in his hand.

He saw her, finally, sprawled out over the beams. She was surrounded by a cushion of fiberglass insulation. Her face twisted miserably. Walt knitted his brow as he cautiously paced closer.

He bared his teeth and hissed when he saw the ankle, twisted so badly it had to be broken. Already it was turning dark purple at the joint. Her foot was bent at an impossible angle.

“Shit,” he said.

“Help me,” Amanda whispered.

“What did you do?”

“It hurts!”

“Jesus, Amanda...”

Amanda braced herself with her palms and hoisted her torso up so that she could glower at Walt.

“Help me, goddamnit!”

Walt hemmed and hawed, made an O with his mouth, and then scurried to Amanda’s side.

“What can I do?”

“Get the shackle off!”

Walt frowned.

“I can’t do that, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart. She could not believe that.

“Why the hell not? Just take it off!”

“You’ll run away.”

“On this?” She jabbed a finger toward her mangled ankle.

Walt raised his eyebrows and nodded. It could not be denied—she wasn’t going to run anywhere.

“Hold on,” he said, displaying his palms. “I’ve got to get some pliers.”

“Hurry!”

“I will! I’ll be right back.”

She moaned in pain and let herself sink back down to the floor, such as it was. Walt danced over the beams and insulated panels toward the door in the floor. He disappeared in seconds. Amanda groaned, squeezed her eyes shut and then opened them again. White sparks flickered in front of her face for a minute, and then gradually dissolved. When her vision was clear again, she found herself staring at a curious object, something she could not have even wished for in her wildest fantasy.

A wooden handled meat cleaver, covered in blood, was just inches from her face.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The pliers had to be somewhere, only Walt was not sure exactly where that might be. Despite the fact that he'd moved into the house months ago, he never got around to unpacking everything. Just the essentials. Loads of knick-knacks, the unnecessary flotsam and jetsam accumulated over the course of a man's life, remained stored in taped cardboard boxes. Many of these boxes were still stacked in the dining room, whereas others had been shoved into closets. Any one of them could contain Walt's pliers. There was no telling which.

He found himself standing with knees bent and arms akimbo, whipping his head left and right, wondering where to begin looking. *Tool kit, tool kit...where's the tool kit?* He had his hammer, the selfsame hammer with which he pummeled Gwynplaine and locked the clevis in place on Amanda's shackle. That must have come from the tool kit. So where was the rest?

Walt squeezed his eyes shut and tried to picture the tool kit in his mind. He remembered where the hammer fit into it, right on top, but he had no recollection of unpacking it. Perhaps the hammer had already been unpacked. Perhaps it had never been in the red toolbox at all.

"*Waaaalt*," Gwynplaine called from the hallway, all sing-songy and creepily seductive. "I'm...not...*done*."

"Just a minute," he called back. "I've got to think."

Needle-nose pliers, with red rubber handles. Walt knew he had them.

But where?

Why couldn't he remember?

Pinching the bridge of his nose between forefinger and thumb, Walt strained to place the kit, certain that he must have taken it out, used it. All those repairs. The baseboards and the roof, and...

The roof.

The *attic*.

"Fuck," Walt said.

It was the quickest of motions. Her arm shot out, her fingers curled around the wood handle. It was tacky with blood. She then retracted the arm, sliding the cleaver beneath her, between her breasts.

And she waited.

Walt sped back through the kitchen and into the hallway. He leapt over Margaret's grisly remains and landed on the attic stairs' penultimate step. Gwynplaine gnarled.

"Leave her!"

Walt ignored the creature. Of *course* it would want Walt to let Amanda suffer. Suffering was all it knew. It thrived on the agony of others, Walt's included. He had been willing to facilitate its ghastly needs thus far, but

allowing harm come to Amanda was too much. Regardless of the torment he'd put her through in the past several weeks, Walt still loved her. And the woman he loved was presently languishing in excruciating pain.

He bounded up the steps and hopped up into the attic. Amanda lay on her stomach, her contorted ankle darker than before. She was motionless. Walt let out a gasp.

"Amanda?"

No response came. Walt paused, conflicted between rushing to find the tool kit and checking on Amanda. He made a quick scan in the dim gray light of the attic and, not seeing the toolbox, decided on the latter. He scrabbled over to her side, crouching down and gently setting a hand on the back of her hot, damp neck.

"Sweetheart? Are you—?"

Okay? Alive? Walt did not have the opportunity to decide which adjective to employ. In that instant, Amanda turned on her side and unleashed a banshee scream. Walt's eyes popped and he started to back away, the hand on her neck flying up and away from her. He only caught the quicksilver gleam of the cleaver when it was already slicing through his index finger. When the middle finger joined it on the floor and the blood started spurting out of the two ragged stumps, he shrieked.

Amanda lurched forward on her stomach and swung the cleaver again. Walt dropped onto his back, narrowly missing the blade as it passed a half inch from his neck. Before she could swipe at him again, he quickly skittered

backward, putting as much distance between him and Amanda as possible.

“I’ll kill you!” she screamed. “I’m gonna *kill you!*”

“Jesus!” Walt squeaked. He planted his hands behind him for support, and then screamed again. Pain shot up his arm, filled his shoulder and neck and head. It was blinding and intense. For a moment, his fear of Amanda made him forget all about his maimed hand. But he remembered now.

He fell back and slammed his head against a support beam, the one Margaret had been chained to.

There was an audible thump, and then Walt was silent and still.

Amanda growled, swinging the cleaver. Walt did not react. She threw her arm back over her head and hurled the blade at him. It only clanged against the beam and landed in his lap.

“Oh, shit,” she whimpered.

In the span of a second, her rage turned to despair. She might have killed Walt after all, but with him out of reach and no means to get the shackle off, there was no hope for escape anymore.

Amanda pounded her fist against one of the beams underneath her and burst into tears.

“You rotten son of a bitch,” she sobbed. “You can’t even die right.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Gravel sprayed out from beneath the skidding tires when Sarah hit the brakes. She'd gone too far down Highway 5 and missed the turn-off. It would have been nice if the web mapping site mentioned how obscured it was—there was nothing but trees out there and she never even saw the street she was supposed to turn left onto. It was downright primeval.

Jerking the stick into reverse, Sarah backed up to the opposite side of the road and pulled back out onto the southbound side. She slammed it into drive and was about to hit the accelerator when she saw the possum in the middle of the lane in front of her. It was a fat, mangy creature with infrequent splotches of yellowish white fur and beady, too-far-apart eyes that shimmered in the glow of the headlights.

“Ugly cuss,” Sarah said.

She revved the engine, hoping to scare the possum off. But it didn't budge. She revved it again, and this time the animal bunched up its back and growled. It bared its fangs. It actually appeared angry.

“I don't have time for this.”

The sun was on the verge of setting for the evening, a phenomenon that seemed to come quicker in the dark and dankness of the old growth forest. Plus, she'd already gotten herself mixed up once, and that was with light. There were no streetlights out there, no houses or

apartment buildings or even a mobile home. Once it got dark, it was going to be *dark*.

Sarah tapped the pedal, lurching the car forward a couple of feet. The possum backed up, but remained in the road. Twice more they repeated the dance, she and the critter, and still it would not get out of the way. It just snarled and growled.

Probably rabid, Sarah thought. *A mad possum. Ought to be put out of its misery.*

“But not me,” she said aloud. It was nasty, the possum, but Sarah still could not bring herself to harm it.

Instead, she turned the wheel and slowly pulled over to the left lane. The animal stayed where it was, watching her as she rolled past it. When she was safely clear of the possum she sped up and took the hidden road on the right. Sarah was now less than a mile from Walt’s front door.

The brakes screeched as the truck came to an abrupt halt. He thought it was a dog at first, and he was not about to run down some poor pooch. But now he could see it was only a damn possum. The disgusting thing wasn’t any more than a giant rat.

He punched it. His car sped from zero at six feet away from the possum to forty-five on top of it. With a soul-rending squeal and a loud pop, the possum split apart beneath the weight of his right front tire.

King grinned as his truck sped down the road, leaving a thin red smear in its wake.

“Now where are you, girl?” he whispered to himself.

The porch was dark when she got there. She might have passed right by it had she not recognized Walt’s old station wagon, the same one he’d had for years. It had the same snobby bumper sticker Sarah had noted the last time she saw it.

READ THE BOOK—IT’S BETTER.

Classic Walt. Always the smug pedant.

She pulled in behind the station wagon, parked and stepped out onto the driveway. She could only barely make out the shape of the house in the gray moonlight. There wasn’t a single light on inside.

Taking each step with blind caution, Sarah crossed the front yard to the porch, slowly ascended the steps and found the front door. She felt around for a doorbell but found none. Accordingly, she knocked.

Then there was silence. Somewhere in the dense trees beyond the yard an owl hooted. Sarah waited a couple minutes more, then knocked again. Nothing. Not even footsteps or breathing from the other side of the door. She checked her watch, but she could not see its face. At any rate, she knew it was not quite nine o’clock. Too early to be sleeping, but it was possible that Walt was out.

One last time, Sarah rapped her knuckles on the door. She expected no result and got none. Nobody was home.

She recognized the outline of a rocking chair in front of the darkened bay window and walked over to it. She sat with a heavy sigh, allowing the impetus of her weight in the chair to gently rock her. Her eyes slid shut, not that it much mattered. It was just as dark either way.

Sarah's mind floated over her options. She could wait for him, but there was no telling when he would return. She could find a motel and come back in the morning, but the nearest hint of human civilization was at least fifteen miles back the way she came. That seemed somehow regressive. Sarah decided to wait.

And while she waited, she drifted to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Somewhere in the void was a hollow pounding. It sounded like it might be underwater, but Walt did not think he was underwater. If he was, he wouldn't be able to breathe.

Or sleep.

He danced over the notion of investigating the noise.

Seeing where it was. What it was. If it really was deep underwater.

Like in the ocean.

But Walt could not sleep in the ocean.

So he ignored it.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Clamping her teeth down on the beam beneath her face, Amanda bit down as hard as she could. She had a miniscule glimmer of hope that the ankle would eventually go numb and the pain would stop. It didn't. It hurt more now than it had since she broke it. Walt was no help, of course. He was still blacked out four yards away. There was nothing else to do but to bite down and bear it.

That was what Amanda had been doing for half an hour or more when she heard someone knock on the front door. The sound was faint, little more than a distant tapping from where she lay in the attic, but she recognized it for what it was. Someone was there. Someone who might save her.

The police? Nora? Anyone would do. Amanda unhinged her jaw and pulled her teeth out of the bitter-tasted wood. She did not realize how deeply her teeth had sunken in. Ropes of drool slavered out of her mouth, which she wiped on her shoulder. She listened.

For a while there was nothing more. But then the knocking resumed.

Amanda sucked in a long, deep breath, filling her lungs beyond capacity. She was preparing to scream louder and longer than she'd ever screamed before.

"Don't. Scream."

The air in Amanda's lungs pushed out of her mouth in a quiet sputter. Now her heart was slamming and her breath came in short, sibilant bursts.

It was the monster.

The thing Walt called *Gwynplaine*.

Whatever the hell that meant.

The two words, spoken in a calm and glottal manner, terrified Amanda enough to keep silent. All she could hear for several minutes thereafter was her own hissing breath. Then the knocking returned, louder and more insistent than before. Amanda's shoulders jumped, pulling at her body and raking her destroyed ankle against the sail shackle. She let out a shout of pain.

"*Quiet!*" the monster hissed.

Silence drifted back down on the attic like a coat of dust. The minutes passed. Five, ten, fifteen. Amanda did not know how long it went on, but it seemed to her like forever. A whole night.

Then the scraping started.

A sandpapery, scratching sound, coming from the far end of the attic. The end where the creature was. Amanda gasped and peered into the darkness. She could not see a thing, not even in the weak blue moonlight that snuck past the broken slats in the air vent. But the noise went on; scraping, scratching, *cracking*.

The paneling, the spot where the stain first showed up when Walt moved in. That's where it was. The stain grew into a nightmare, and the nightmare was breaking free.

“Please,” Amanda whimpered.

She was not at all sure what she meant. All she knew was that she was afraid. And she did not want to be hurt anymore than she already was.

“Please.”

Wood splintered, snapping apart in a rapid series of loud pops. The creature moaned. Amanda could not determine if it was from pleasure or pain. Maybe both.

Ahhhhhh, it went.

A soft, raspy chuckle erupted from that corner.

“Oh, please.”

Amanda started to cry. She did not want to, but it could not be helped. As the tears filled her eyes and blurred what little vision she had, one last splitting crack filled the air. It was followed by a strained grunt and a pair of hollow thumps.

It was crawling up into the attic.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Sarah awoke to a warm, damp hand closing over her mouth. She tried to gasp, but ended up sucking at the sweaty skin of the calloused palm on her face. When she smelled the stale cigarette breath steaming out of the mouth at her ear, she knew exactly what was happening. It terrified her.

“Hello there, pretty lady,” King hissed. “Almost lost you. But here we are, right?”

Sarah shivered. She had been right about that truck the first time. It hadn’t been any redneck kids. It was King all along.

And now it was too late.

“How come you’re sleeping on the porch? ‘Cause this ain’t your house? Sounds about right. You thought you was free and clear, but ain’t nobody home. Poor lady. Lucky King.”

He gave a phlegmy chortle. His breath was unbearable, filtered only by the stale reek of his hand so close to her nose.

Sarah murmured, unable to make herself heard.

“What’s that?” King asked.

She murmured again.

“Can’t hear you. Trouble is, I take my hand away and you scream your goddamn head off, don’t ya? Then where’d we be? That’s no way to start this romance.”

Warm tears oozed out of her eyes and ran down to King’s fingers. Strange as it seemed to her, she kept

thinking about Walt. Specifically, that this was entirely his fault. If he hadn't gotten his phone line disconnected, if he hadn't always been such a contemptible *bastard*, none of this would have ever happened.

Sarah would not have driven out here so suddenly.
And she would never have met King.

Fuck you, Walt. I hate you even more than I hate this piece of shit creep.

"So I reckon you'd better tell me, and tell me straight. Is there anybody in that house right now?"

Sarah shook her head, at least as much as she was able to with King holding her so tightly.

"You sure about that? 'Cause if you're wrong, it's gunna be bad, pretty lady. *Real* bad."

He pressed his thin lips against her ear canal.

"For you," he whispered.

Sarah nodded to indicate that she understood. She was ninety-nine percent certain that Walt was not at home. But even on that off chance, that one percent that he might be in there, Sarah felt comfortable with her response.

Because maybe King would just kill that rotten bastard and put him out of everybody's misery.

"All right, then," King said happily. "Let's us go on in, now."

Chapter Thirty

Naturally, the door was locked. There was a time when people way out in the boonies never locked their doors, but the collective anxiety of home invasions had reached its black tendrils even this far. It was not a problem for King, however. All he had to do was deliver a threesome of powerful, full-bodied kicks to the door and it split apart from the jamb. Then only a nudge was needed to push it in, and ingress was secured.

“Easy,” he muttered.

With his hand still gripped so tightly around Sarah’s arm that the skin was turning paper white, King dragged her into the foyer and bumped the door back into place with his rump.

The house was dead quiet. Pitch black, as well.

“Find the light switch,” King instructed by way of a harsh whisper.

“I’ve never been here before.”

“I didn’t ask you that, pretty lady. Find it.”

Sarah tried to move away from King’s grasp, but he held firm. Again she yanked on her arm, but he kept her where she was.

“Do you want me to find it or not?”

“You make a break for it, and I’ll make a break of you.”

Sarah sneered in the darkness. Dangerous and stupid. A remarkably loathsome combination.

Walt released her arm and she cautiously wandered close to the wall, feeling for the switch. She found it quickly and flipped it up. A porch light came on outside, but it provided enough light through the window for Sarah to see the panel now. There was another switch, which she also flipped. A light fixture dangling from the ceiling came on, flooding the foyer with light. Walt stared up at it like he'd never seen a light bulb before, his mouth hanging open. Then he turned his gaze on Sarah and flashed one his toothy grins.

"Good," he said. "We'll find the bedroom in a minute. First let's see if we can scare us up some hooch."

Sarah trembled. The son of a bitch wanted to get tight before he ravaged her. The situation just kept getting worse. She could see no reason why he wouldn't slash her throat once he was done with her. Seemed like the bastard's style.

"Come on. Hurry up."

This time King left her bruised arm alone and seized her by the other one. Then he dragged her into the kitchen.

The area was shrouded in shadows, but the light from the foyer kept enough of the darkness at bay for King to make his way to the refrigerator, with Sarah in tow. He opened it up, spilling sickly yellow light out onto the linoleum. After a brief inventory, he grunted.

"Shit. No beer."

"I don't think he's much of a beer drinker," Sarah offered.

“Who?”

“Walt.”

“And who the hell is Walt?”

“My brother,” Sarah said bitterly.

“You don’t say.”

King shut the fridge and, letting go of Sarah’s arm, startling rifling through the cabinets.

“So this shitbird is your brother, but you never been in house before.”

“We’re not close.”

“That so? How come—he fiddle with your clam when you was little or something?”

Sarah huffed.

“You’re repulsive.”

That elicited a hearty laugh from King.

“Do my best, pretty lady. Do my best.”

Moving from one mostly empty cabinet to the next, King finished up his search by slamming the cabinet door as hard as possible.

“Goddamnit!” he howled.

“No liquor either, I take it.”

“This shitheel brother of yours a Baptist or something?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Fuck, man. This is shit. Be okay if I had some blow on me, *something*. But *this* is shit.”

King saddled up to Sarah, rubbing his chin.

“Best hope that fella don’t come home tonight. I’ll break his neck just for that.”

An acidic laugh escaped Sarah's lips.

"Be my guest," she groaned.

"Hell," King complained. "I just don't like it without a buzz at least."

Sarah was about to ask *Don't like what?* But she knew. Her throat tightened up as she curled her hands into fists.

"Let's not, then, and say we did," she said through clenched teeth.

King burst into a peal of raucous laughter.

"Nice try, woman."

Seizing her roughly by the shoulders, King pulled Sarah toward him and smashed his lips against hers. Sarah moaned and wriggled, but she could not overpower him. When he slipping his tongue between her lips, she considered biting it off. It would be easy; just suck it in, clamp down and don't let go. But then what? Would a severed tongue stop him from tearing her apart?

Sarah did not bite. But when she tasted the sour, nicotine moisture on King's tongue, she did gag. Her throat lurched and a wet, hollow gurgle bubbled up from it. King snapped his head back and landed a hard slap across her face.

"You wanta puke in my mouth? Is that it?"

"I'm sorry..."

"Don't piss me off, pretty lady. I mean it."

"I know you do."

“You’d best think about what makes King happy. ‘Cause you try something I don’t like, you ain’t gunna be such a pretty lady anymore. Get it?”

“Yeah.”

“I said *Get it?*”

“I get it.”

King smiled thinly.

“Good, baby. Good.”

He kissed her once, softly, and then yanked her by the wrist as he went deeper into the darkness.

“Let’s find us that bed.”

“Oh, god,” Sarah sobbed.

The hell into which she stumbled could not get any more real. All she wanted to do was shove Walt’s selfishness in his face for once, turn around and return to her perfectly ordinary, boring life. Mitch and the house and the stupid neighborhood association. The most intense experience she wanted to have was bullying Maude Kruppa into cutting down that rotten pear tree in her front yard. It was a goddamned eyesore.

But this.

King pulled her across the kitchen and into the tar-black hall behind it. Sarah sucked in a deep breath and lashed out with her free hand, raking her nails across King’s face. He screeched.

“Bitch!”

He brought both hands to his face, an instinctual reaction. It bought Sarah enough time to break into a sprint back through the kitchen, toward the light of the

foyer. She was almost to the door when the shrill scream sounded from above.

Sarah skidded to a stop.

What the hell was that?

Sarah wondered if the house had an attic. It had to. There was no second story and that scream definitely came from above. Someone else King was abusing? But he could not have been in the house before she got there—he had to follow her to see where she was going. Still, she was asleep for a bit, although she had no idea for how long.

All of this passed through Sarah's mind in a fraction of a second. King would have already come to his senses by then, come running after her. Now Sarah faced a tough choice: get clear of King and this damned house, or stick around to check on whoever was screaming in the attic.

No contest.

Sarah threw the door open and leapt out onto the porch.

Before her feet hit the ground, King wrapped a beefy arm around her waist and pulled her back inside. He slammed the door shut with his free hand and dragged Sarah back into the shadows.

"No!" she shrieked.

"Feisty is good," King explained with anger in his voice. "But now you've gone and stepped over the line."

Sarah bucked and squirmed, but King's thick, hairy arm might as well have been an iron girder. He was

breathing hard, grunting. Sarah was beginning to feel faint.

“I’m a man of my word, pretty lady. When you and me are done with what we come for, I’m gunna slash your fucking face to ribbons.”

Sarah whimpered.

The light from the foyer abandoned her as they descended deeper into the house. Past the kitchen, into the ink black hallway. A cruel chortle escaped King’s lips. He was enjoying himself.

Sarah was now absolutely certain that she was going to die tonight.

But didn’t he hear that scream?

Of course he did. He’s got more irons in the fire than just me.

She closed her eyes and held her breath. Not quite resigning herself to her fate, but accepting that it was inevitable. Inwardly, she cursed Walt.

Everything was his fault. Always was.

Completely immersed in the dark, Sarah felt the world tilt and turn. She figured she was just passing out (*thank GOD*) until King emitted a startled squawk and they tumbled over one another. Sarah hit the floor, landed hard on her rump, and King crashed down on top of her a quarter of a second later. Pain shot up her spine, tingling in her shoulders. She planted a hand on the floor to steady herself, hoping to crawl out from beneath King’s dead weight. Her fingers sank into something warm and wet.

“What...”

King growled and rolled off of her. She heard a moist *splat*.

“The fuck is this?” he grunted.

Sarah took immediate advantage of the distraction and scooted backward, over the soft lumps and sticky wetness that covered the floor. She smelled a sour odor; excrement, but with a tangy metallic smell floating over it. Wrinkling her nose, Sarah kept skidding over the mess until her back hit a wall. What had Walt done back here? Some kind of major septic leak, she guessed. More of an explosion than a leak, though.

This is revolting.

She tried to shimmy up the wall, but her clothes and hands were so sticky and slimy from the nasty stuff all over the floor that she just slid back down to the floor. A second attempt concluded with the same results.

Then another shriek erupted from above. Following it was a guttural yell. Something clattered in front of her.

King shouted, “Shit!”

Sarah flipped over onto her hands and knees and scrambled for the kitchen. She could hear King slam into something and skid across the slick floor. His boots squealed. Once she was out of the morass of the hallway, she was able to spring back up to her feet. This time there would be no hesitation.

She bolted for the door.

And she was on the front porch before she realized that she was coated in blood. Her blouse and skirt were dark with it, and her bare arms and hands were red and dripping.

“Oh my god,” she mewled.

Footsteps pounded heavily behind her. Sarah gasped and rushed down the porch steps and across the front yard.

“You’re dead!” King bellowed close behind. “DEAD!”

Then a chilling howl filled the night air. King bleated, “...the hell?”

He yelled. Something slammed, hard.

Against her better judgment, Sarah stopped where Walt’s yard met the road and turned back toward the house. The door stood open and the bright foyer shone out. King lay on his stomach in the doorway. Crouched on top of him, someone—*something*—flailed arms, raking at his back and neck. It howled and shrieked and cackled madly. Sarah shuddered, frozen with fear and bafflement.

What is that?

In the light of the porch and foyer, she could see that it was bright red. A full body suit, she wondered? No, that lunatic is just covered in blood, just like me. King blubbered and shouted under the maniac, struggling to crawl away but making no progress. In seconds his shirt was shredded and the attacker was clawing at the skin now exposed. Laughing. Grinning like a clown.

Even at that distance, Sarah could see its brilliant white teeth, gleaming in the porch light. By the time it thrust its face into King's back, gnashing at the flesh with its teeth, it dawned on Sarah that it was not merely covered in blood.

It had no skin.

Red and white tendons stretched where cheeks should have been. Bunched cords of muscles twisted and retracted with every move it made. The slippery crown of its exposed head glistened in the light, dripping fluid on all sides.

The creature snapped its head back, throwing viscous ropes of blood and saliva from its mouth. Its bright, wide eyes turned on Sarah and it resumed its horrific smile.

Sarah pivoted to face the road, planning to break into a run.

Instead, all of the light in the world was snuffed out as she crashed into the dewy grass behind her.

Chapter Thirty-One

Amanda could not determine whether Walt was still breathing or not. It did not seem to matter that much, whichever the case. She would still be in agony, still facing a grim future, such as it was.

When the monster's face was illuminated in the weak shaft of moonlight in the attic, Amanda knew that she was about to die. The wicked, lunatic smile told her that much. The bloodied, skinless abomination was free now, no longer dependent on Walt to butcher its meat and feed it. It could take care of that nasty business all on its own. And it was bearing down on its next meal, Amanda.

She winced, shut her eyes, and screamed. The creature laughed at her, chattering its teeth with loud, quick clicks. It moved slowly, stiffly. Not yet accustomed to its legs.

She knew those awful stalks in the pod were legs.

Then it passed out of the light and back into the gray-black darkness. Amanda could only hear its approach from then on out. Sticky, squishing steps on the beams and panels, drawing ever nearer.

Which abruptly stopped at the ruckus that erupted at the bottom of the attic stairs. Thumping, clattering, squeaking of shoes and gasps and shouts.

The monster tittered. *Hee hee hee.*

Amanda screamed again.

And then it was gone, down the ladder. Out of the attic and out of sight. Whoever was down there—no one else was left, who could it be? —provided a sufficient enough distraction to prolong Amanda's life. But for how long?

She waited and listened. Pounding steps, a pair of them. Huffing and snuffling. A man's voice hollering threats.

You're DEAD!

The creature howled. The man shrieked with pain and horror.

Food for the abomination.

Poor son of a bitch, Amanda thought.

For a long time after that, there was nothing. Not one sound drifted up into the attic from below. Amanda started to theorize.

Perhaps it killed the guy, ate its fill and took off for parts unknown. Maybe it's gone, really gone. All that's left is getting the hell out of here.

She was not sure that she really believed any of that. But it certainly sounded nice.

"Walt," she called. "Walt, can you hear me?"

He did not stir.

"Walt, you've got to wake up. Wake up, Walt."

"Hnm?"

"Walt?"

"Wuh."

Amanda let out a long sigh. She realized that it did make a difference, after all. If Walt died then and there,

she could never escape. As much as she hated to admit it, she needed his help.

“Where are the pliers, babe?”

“Pli-uh...?”

“Focus, babe. The pliers. Where are the pliers?”

“Gwen Plain...,” he mumbled.

“Snap out of it, Walt. We’ve got to work fast, here.”

“Where is she?”

“Who?”

“Gwyn. Plain.”

“Fuck,” Amanda grumbled. *He’s totally out of it. Probably concussed.*

She stretched her arms out on either side and felt around in the darkness for something, anything, to pick up and throw at him. She came up empty.

“Now what am I going to do?” she asked no one.

After a while, at least an hour later, Amanda heard shuffling from inside the house. It came back. If indeed it ever left. She’d expected as much.

It moved around noisily, snuffling and groaning. Something got knocked over. Then, when it sounded like it was directly underneath her at the foot of the attic steps, the slurping began. The creature was feeding.

Amanda wanted to cry, but she was all cried out.

The creature was still loudly slurping and gulping when exhaustion finally overtook Amanda. She dropped into a deep, restless sleep.

Chapter Thirty-Two

“Walt.”

The voice sounded muffled, like it was coming through a brick wall.

“Waaaalt.”

He heard it, though. But he felt incapable of responding in any way. He was too tired and in too much pain. His head was throbbing, his muscles sore and stiff. Whoever it was, Walt just wanted them to go away and let him sleep.

Fingers gently brushed his cheek. The fingertips were tacky and coarse. Warm breath spread over his face. It smelled of old pennies.

“Gwynplaine,” Walt whispered as he opened his eyes.

The bare, glistening musculature of Gwynplaine’s broadly smiling face loomed over him. He could hear the slick sounds of the sinews sliding against one another as the smile spread.

“You’re free.”

“Yessss.”

“How?”

“It was time.”

“Wow.”

Walt tried to hoist himself up but his elbows faltered and he slumped back against the pillow.

“Oof. Feel awful.”

“Amanda hurt you,” Gwynplaine said acidly.

Walt narrowed his eyes and, remembering, looked at his hand. It was well wrapped in bloodstained bandages.

“You?”

“Yessss.”

“Thanks.”

“Hurtssss.”

“Yes, it does.”

It continued to grin, in spite of Walt’s admission of pain. Or perhaps because of it. Somehow that seemed more likely to him.

“Amanda,” he said after a long silence. “Is she...?”

“Attic,” Gwynplaine rasped. “Sleeping.”

Walt exhaled and faintly smiled. He was terrified that he was going to hear otherwise, that Gwynplaine killed her and ate her flesh hot and raw. Then he considered his mangled hand again. She’d sliced right through it with his own cleaver. Lopped the fingers right off. That was not something Walt supposed a man could grow accustomed to.

He furrowed his brow.

“You sleep now,” the claret-colored creature continued.

Walt was not wont to argue. He watched with drowsy eyes as the bizarre being strode slowly out of the room. Naked for want of clothes or skin and leaving shiny red footprints in its wake. More astounding than that, however, were the two heavy crimson sacks swinging from its chest as it shambled off. Dark red nubs protruded from the center of each of them.

Breasts.

Walt gaped. Gwynplaine was a woman, after all.

The woman across from Sarah whimpered in her sleep. One look at her gnarled black ankle told the story. It was swollen to the size of a cantaloupe and the darkness spread all the way down to her toes. There was no way she was going to be able to save the foot, much less most of the leg.

Of course, that was based on the assumption that the poor woman ever got out of there. As things stood, the prognosis was not good. Sarah had come to before the break of dawn, confused, afraid and more than a little nauseous. She was immersed in near total darkness, all but the small square of yellowish light that partially illuminated the wretched woman chained to the nearest support beam. Immediately, Sarah had leapt up to try to help her, realizing right away that this had to have been the woman whose screams she'd heard. Ergo, she also noted, she must be in the attic. But when she rose up and lurched forward, a cold grip yanked her back and down to the hard cross beams on the attic floor. She, too, was chained.

By Walt? Or by that loathsome thing that attacked—*killed?*—King? Sarah much preferred marking that part down as a shock-induced hallucination, but deep in her heart she knew that was not true. She saw it, all right. In all its nightmarish, blood-encrusted horror.

Now, hours after sunrise and still chained to a sturdy oak post, Sarah languished across from an insensate woman she did not know. She also did not know how either of them got there, nor what was to become of them.

And then there was the appalling mess on the other side of the attic.

Huge, membranous flaps of tissue, splayed out around a gaping hole in the floor. It looked like someone crawled up through the hole and lost their skin on the way. The amount of rusty fluid drying all around it was suggestive of blood, anyway. Sarah shuddered to imagine what it was and how it got that way.

It was clear enough that it had something to do with the creature that killed King. Where it came from, perhaps. Maybe, Sarah considered, it hatched there.

What the hell was Walt up to?

Growing monsters in the attic? Summoning demons from Hell? At this point, nearly anything seemed possible to her. Her own imminent death at the hands of that creature somehow seemed the most possible of all.

Sarah scrunched up her face, fighting back the tears that were threatening a deluge. Instead she changed her focus to the injured woman with whom she was sharing her unenviable accommodations.

“Hey. Hey, lady. Can you hear me?”

The woman did not stir.

“Lady. *Pssst.*”

Nothing.

“My name is Sarah. Sarah Hall. Well, Sarah *Blackmore*-Hall, if you want to be anal about it, but I’m not feeling so great about the old family name just now. I guess you know tons more about what’s going on here than I do, but I’d stake everything I’ve got that my worthless piece of crap brother is behind it. Do you know him? Name’s Walt. If you do, I’m sorry for you.” She sighed. “But I guess if you’re here, you know him all right. Unless you were kidnapped or something. He didn’t just snatch you, did he?”

The woman mumbled something incoherent. Sarah’s face brightened. *She’s awake!*

“What was that?”

“Mm’s grrfrin.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that...”

The woman turned her head without moving anything else, just rolling it over like a bowling ball until they were facing one another. Sarah narrowed her eyes, taking in the stranger’s features. She was really quite pretty, despite how ragged she looked.

“I’m his girlfriend,” the woman said quietly.

“No shit.”

“Was. Two years. I don’t...I don’t know what...what happ—”

With that, the woman broke down. She softly cried for several minutes, making no attempt to disguise her grief. Sarah certainly did not know the woman’s full story, but she could guess at most of it. It was obvious enough: after two years of romantic bliss with the

world's biggest creep, good old Walt finally came clean and showed his true colors. Truer colors than he'd probably ever shown anyone, replete with torture, kidnapping, probably murder and a bit of mind-bogglingly horrific voodoo madness. And now here she was, whoever she was...

"What's your name?"

"Amanda."

"Nice name. My college roommate was named Amanda."

"Yeah?"

"But she was awful. Just awful."

"Oh."

"I can tell you're not, though. I didn't mean..."

"S'okay. No hard feelings."

Amanda immediately followed that with an agonized squeal. Sarah instinctively lunged forward to help her, only to pull the steel rope taut, thereby hurting her own ankle in the process.

"Ow!"

"Careful. You don't want to end up like me."

"Did he do that? Walt, I mean?"

"No. That was my own fault, really. I was trying to figure a way out, fell head over ass and snapped it in two."

"Oh my god..."

"Got him pretty good, though."

"Walt?"

"You bet."

“What’d you do?”

“Sliced a few fingers off with his cleaver. He won’t forget that. Even if he kills me, he won’t ever forget that I got him back for it.”

“Jesus,” Sarah moaned.

Amanda screwed up her face, quiet in her patent anguish.

“Did you...see it? The *monster*, I mean?”

Sarah frowned. Somewhere in the back of her mind she’d hoped she imagined it, or that it was only a person and she misjudged what she saw. Amanda’s matter of fact question put that to rest. There was a monster, indeed.

“I guess I did.”

“It didn’t attack you?”

“I saw it kill a guy, I think.”

“Oh, no...”

“It’s okay. I mean, it’s not *okay*, but he wasn’t with me. He was just some inbred redneck who followed me here. He was going to...well, you know. Probably kill me when he was done.”

Amanda gave a sour laugh.

“Well, what do you know? I guess the devil does favors sometimes.”

Sarah shivered. They were both silent for several minutes thereafter. It was Sarah who eventually broke the silence.

“Amanda?”

“Yeah?”

“What is it?”

“The monster?”

“Yeah.”

“I suppose only Walt could tell you that. Or maybe he couldn’t, I don’t know. All I know is I had a perfectly sweet and gentle guy until he moved into this goddamn haunted house.”

“Haunted?”

“Not literally. I don’t think. See, there was this stain on the ceiling...”

Amanda told the story to Sarah, as much as she knew. For her part, Sarah listened quietly and intently, her face constantly betraying her horror and near disbelief. Indeed, had she not seen the glistening, blood-coated thing with her own eyes—much less the stomach-churning charnel house it had made of the hallway below—Sarah could never have believed something so outlandish, so nightmarish. It was fodder for paperback horror novels with lurid, gory covers, but nothing that could ever actually transpire in the real material world.

Except that it could. And it did.

At the conclusion of Amanda’s terrible tale, Sarah buried her face in her hands and wept.

“Poor Margaret,” she sobbed. She never knew the woman, never would, but she grieved all the same. No one deserved a fate that awful, not even Walt. “How could this happen, Amanda? How?”

“I can’t tell you, darling. I suppose this house has got some pretty nasty secrets.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry? For what?”

“I’m just so sorry you ever had to meet my brother.”

Sarah’s eyes spilled over again. Amanda’s did, too.

“Yeah,” Amanda said. “Me too.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

“What is your name?”

She laughed. Walt had been glaring at her for a half hour now. He remained in bed, recuperating, while she—the *creature*—perched on the high back chair in the corner with her knees up to her chin. Watching him.

“Gwynplaine.”

“But that’s just the name I gave you.”

“Good enough.”

“Haven’t you got one of your own? I mean, you came into the world able to speak, grew into an...an adult, I guess.”

“Yesss,” she hissed. “I am nearly done.”

Nearly done, Walt thought. *Like a roast in the broiler.*

He gazed at her face, studied the fine strands of her exposed muscles and tendons, her omnipresent rictus grin. It was an eerily knowing face. It betrayed knowledge and experience Walt was not sure he wanted to be privy to.

“You were around before all this, weren’t you? In some weird way?”

She smiled thinly and nodded once.

“What were you called then?”

“Does not matter. That is past. Now I am Gwynplaine.”

“Gwynplaine was a man,” Walt protested, his mind involuntarily turning up the grotesque image of Conrad Veidt in the role of the perpetually grinning freak.

And then, her grin faded; a rarity. She moved her jaws back and forth, deep in thought.

“Gwyn,” she decided.

“Like Gwendolyn.”

“Gwyn is good. Only Gwyn. I am Gwyn.”

“All right. You’re Gwyn, then.”

In spite of himself, Walt smiled.

He slept for most of what remained of the day, waking only when he turned in his sleep and jammed the fresh stumps where his fingers used to be. In those instances, Walt snapped awake with a shout; Gwyn was at his side each time in seconds, hissing comforting words in his ear as she ran her sticky fingers through his sweaty hair. After everything that happened in the night, from the chaos in the attic to the astonishing development in Gwyn’s case, it never occurred to Walt that he failed to show up at school that day.

It *did* occur to the administrative staff in Principal Byrne’s office, of course. They were forced to scramble for a substitute at the last minute, an inconvenience brought about by the unusual call the secretary received from a gravel-voiced woman at half past seven that morning.

“Misssster Blackmore is sick. Very sick. He comessss back *next* week.”

And with that, the sibilant voice was rendered silent by the click of the disconnecting line.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Three days after Amanda's ankle was broken, the infection became apparent. The entire joint swelled to bursting. It went from red to bronze, and from bronze it turned a sickly black-green. Enormous blisters speckled the area from the middle of her foot to the center of her shin, which reeked of putrescence when they broke and started to leak.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, Amanda dry heaved for hours. Not long after sunset, she collapsed into a coma.

Sarah remained awake throughout the night, weeping loudly and calling Amanda's name. Screaming it.

By dawn on the fifth day after the injury, Amanda was dead.

Sarah decided it must have been gangrene. Walt had not done a thing about it. He had not come up into the attic at all since Sarah woke up there. But she could hear him down below. Talking to *it*.

Thus she made up her mind then and there. If Walt did not kill his sister first, she was going to kill him.

WINTER

Alice

The fire in Agnes' eyes is hot and angry. She does not know what to make of it. Only minutes ago she saved Agnes from a nasty thing, the worst bad thing. Saved her from ever having to go through it again. She should be hugging me and kissing me all over. Thank you, little sister, thank you! But no. Agnes looks like a wild beast, a wolf about to tear its prey apart. Her eyes glimmer as though wet, tremble almost imperceptibly. The older girl is shaking with rage. Agnes closes two fists over her nightdress and drags her from the bedroom. You are going up there, she says. Up into Papa's attic.

And you are never coming out.

Chapter Thirty-Five

When Walt was fourteen years old his father and stepmother's house burned to the ground. He was aware of that piece of history now as he roamed its inexplicably pristine rooms fifteen years later, but somehow it seemed insignificant to him. The house was never quite home to Walt, but there were hundreds of memories here all the same. The bookshelves in the study that reached to the ceiling. The fireplace in the master bedroom with an extra opening in the master bath. The kidney shaped swimming pool out back and the naughty games Walt had played in it with Cheryl Atkinson when his folks were away on vacation. There were probably a hundred things he could seek out as he floated from room to room, slowly remembering, but for some reason all Walt wanted to do was find his old bowling ball.

Sure enough, the oily smelling leather bag was right where he'd left it the last time Walt was in the house, on the top shelf of his upstairs bedroom. He was a hell of a bowler in those days, top of the youth league and better than most adults he ever played against. He took excellent care of that ball and recalled how, of all the things he'd lost in the blaze, it was that ball he most regretted losing. But here it was now, just above him on that high shelf. He reached up and pulled the heavy blue bag down. The shelf was not as high as he remembered it. Of course, Walt was taller now.

Setting the bowling bag on the unmade bed, Walt trembled with anticipation. It was just a bowling ball, in no way particularly superior to any other ball he'd ever used, but it was *this* one with which he'd won so many tournaments. It was *this* one that had miraculously been returned to him. Or was it the other way around? Perhaps it was Walt who had been returned to the ball. To the house. It did not matter. He licked his lips and unzipped the bag. The metal teeth spread apart and Walt dropped both hands into the musky darkness inside. His fingers pressed hard against the firm surface of the ball. He hefted it up and out of the bag.

And then he yelled with fright and revulsion. He was not holding a bowling ball at all, but rather the gray, severed head of his own father.

Walt let go of the head and let it fall back into the bag. It thumped against the bottom. Walt shivered and quickly backed away from it, scrabbling backwards to the closet. His momentum was halted when his back hit the slatted closet door. The door slammed into the shelf. A half dozen more decapitated heads rolled off the shelf, raining terror down on Walt. He screamed. Then he realized he was awake.

Still the dream lingered in his mind as if trying to break out of his brain and into reality. Walt recognized the difference between nightmares and the waking world, but he found himself worrying about what he was going to do with all those damn heads nonetheless.

There are no heads, stupid, he chastised himself. *Get up and shake it off.*

He did. Flinging the sheets back, he sat up on the edge of the bed and forced his eyes wide open. He sucked the cool night air in through his nose and then blew it out of his mouth. The heads began to dissolve along with his sleepiness. Walt remembered them, but only as a weird nightmare. Nothing more.

He stood up, stretched, and fumbled around in the dark bedroom in search of a shirt to slip into. The floor yielded only underwear and socks. The top of the dresser was clear of all clothing save for his sweatpants, which he snatched and stepped into. Carefully, Walt checked the bed. He found no shirt. He did not find Gwyn, either. She must have gotten out of bed at some point in the night.

Walt wrinkled his nose and felt his heart flutter. This seemed like something worth worrying about.

Dudley Chapel tossed and turned. The blame for his sleeplessness laid mostly on his aching back, but his knees and right hip shared the culpability. Before bed he'd taken three ibuprofen, but Dudley snapped awake just three hours later with pain biting into his back and side. The older he got, the more everything hurt. He tried to be philosophical about it, but it was now almost two in the morning and he did not much feel like

counting his blessings. He just wanted the pain to stop, if only for a little while.

Rose breathed slowly and softly beside him, fast asleep. Unlike Dudley, Rose suffered no such problems in her muscles and joints. She was ten years his junior and though no spring chicken, she was as fit as a fiddle. Dudley envied her for that, but he also thanked the creator that his wife of thirty-six years was still so spry and healthy. The way things were going, he expected to be six feet underground before her body began to really fail her. It was selfish to be thankful for that, and he knew it, but seeing Rose go to pot the way he was starting to do just wasn't something he thought he could make it through. Dudley loved her too much for that.

After rolling over for the umpteenth time that night, he finally resolved to just get out of bed. Sleep was going to be elusive, and Dudley was in no mood to chase it. He had half a pitcher of lemonade in the icebox and a recent adventure novel on the table beside his favorite chair downstairs. He figured if he fell asleep while reading, then great. Otherwise, he aimed to read until sunrise and then take the day as it came. Life could be worse.

So Dudley poured himself a glass of lemonade, dunked three ice cubes in the glass and settled into his chair for the long haul.

He was halfway through a riveting sequence in which the American spy is discovered and cornered by KGB henchmen in Soviet-controlled Prague when he heard glass burst and tinkle apart somewhere inside the

house. He dropped the tattered paperback on the table without bothering to bookmark his page and stared, hunching his shoulders and wondering what had happened.

“Rose?”

Dudley exhaled an exasperated sigh. The last thing he wanted to do was to get out of his comfortable chair, but he did not suppose the shattered glass was going to investigate itself. With a frustrated grunt, he heaved himself up and felt the stab of pain in his back as he rose to a standing position.

“Cripes,” he groaned. Then: “Rose? Is that you, sweetheart?”

Heavy breathing sounded from one of the darkened rooms ahead of him. Shuffling movements and the creak of the floor.

“Rose, honey?”

The sneaking sounds moved across the hall and onto the staircase. Whoever it was—*whatever* it was—it was heading upstairs.

Walt made a sweep of the house, growing increasingly desperate to find Gwyn before something terrible happened. What that meant, he was not at all sure. But where Gwyn was involved, terrible things were bound to happen.

He searched the house from the bedrooms to the kitchen cupboard, checked the carport and the front and

back yards. She was nowhere to be found. With a heavy groan he returned to the hallway between the kitchen and his bedroom.

“Goddamn it,” he grunted as he yanked the attic stairs down. The attic was the last logical place to look. And that could not mean anything remotely good.

The ladder clacked loudly to the floor and Walt scurried up its steps, his flashlight tightly gripped in one hand. As soon as he poked his head up into the dark, suffocating space above, he shone the flashlight in slow sweeps across the area. He saw Sarah asleep on the old mattress he’d laboriously dragged up there for her. She was, for the most part, unharmed. The revolting flaps of tissue where Gwyn’s pod once grew continued to rot in the far corner. There was no sign of Gwyn herself.

She was nowhere in the house. She had simply up and left in the middle of the night while Walt slept.

He unconsciously jammed a knuckle into his mouth and bit down on it. There was only one conceivable reason Gwyn would have to leave.

Blood.

Walt had to find her.

Increasingly convinced that a prowler had broken into the house, Dudley crept as quickly and quietly as he could toward the staircase. He had listened as the intruder made his way up them and now he was giving chase. With each too-slow step he took up the stairs,

Dudley tried to figure out how he was going to get to the revolver in the drawer beside the bed without going noticed. By the time he made the landing at the top, he decided it was not possible. He was just going to have to confront the son of a gun barehanded and hope to heaven the prowler was not armed himself.

As Dudley pressed himself against the wall and got ready to sneak up on a potential killer, his mind involuntarily flashed back to Mindanao. Cruising downriver in the landing craft with a hundred other guys, waiting with his heart in his throat to charge out of the craft like they did in Normandy. The melting heat and constant rain having taken its toll. Dudley remembered hoping he could take out at least ten Japs before he died that day.

He didn't, of course. And although he found his brain dancing over the same steps now as it had back then, he had no intention of dying tonight, either. He crept on, closing in on the bedroom at the end of the long, dark hallway. Then he heard the whine of compressed bedsprings and a low, throaty laugh.

Dudley's chest felt tight and his heart leapt, just like that muggy day in the Philippines a lifetime ago.

"Rose," he whispered.

He came into the pitch black room and as he felt along the wall for the light switch, Rose Chapel screamed.

* * *

His muscles reflexively jerking and contracting, Walt traversed the backyard, his path lit only by the faint light of the moon. He had no destination in mind because he had no clue where she might have gone. Walt's new house was in the boonies, the middle of nowhere and on the outskirts of a nowhere town. There were no shops or housing developments anywhere near the place, no apartment complexes or million dollar prefab mansions had yet sprung up. In fact, there was practically no evidence of human civilization for miles around except for that old guy's farmhouse. Walt struggled to recall his name—*Danny? Dabney?*

Dudley. That was it: Dudley Chapel. The irritatingly friendly old man in the red flannel shirt.

Through them woods, over the hill, he'd said. Right at the bottom, that's my property. Big red house with white shutters. Can't miss it.

"Christ," Walt said.

He broke into a run for the tree line. Still, somewhere inside he knew he was already too late.

Dudley flipped the switch with a shaky thumb and choked on the scream rising in his throat. The bedroom had been transformed into a grisly abattoir. What had been white bed sheets and a pastel quilt now dripped crimson wherever Dudley looked. This was no longer his marital bedroom. It was a slaughterhouse.

A terrifying apparition straddled Rose. Like the butchered woman under her, the creature was spattered with blood from top to bottom. All that shone through the gore was its pearly white teeth, straight but overlong, exposed in a rigid, spine-chilling grin. Its right hand was curled tightly around a long shard of broken glass. The shard tapered down to a point at the end. As the creature turned its ghastly smile to Dudley, it jammed the makeshift weapon into Rose's cheek.

Dudley cried out with pain and horror as he watched the jagged glass fragment sink into his dead wife's face, scraping noisily over her teeth before exiting through the other cheek. The creature then gave the shard a sharp yank and it ripped through the flesh, meeting the ends of Rose's mouth. Now it all formed a single gaping gash from one jawbone to the next. Blood gurgled up, flooding her mouth and spilling out on the bed. The creature cackled with mad glee.

Tears squirted from Dudley's eyes as he stumbled forward. His eyes leapt between the creature and Rose, the creature and the drawer beside the bed. That inconceivable *thing*, that devil from hell, had killed his darling Rose. If he could only reach his revolver in time, Dudley could at least make the monster pay for what it had done.

He sped around the corner of the bed and lunged for the brass handle hanging from the face of the drawer. Before he could reach it, the creature swung a wayward fist in a wide arc, connecting it with Dudley's temple. A

bright flash exploded in his eyes and warm, dull pain spread across his entire skull in a second. Dudley dropped to his knees and heard them crack loudly. The creature smirked.

“Fuck off, old man,” it hissed at him. “You must wait your turn. First I eat this one. *Then* you.”

With that the thing sank one of its shiny red hands into Rose’s bloody torso and pulled out a dripping handful of the corpse’s small intestine. It was gray but leaking black, and the horror on the bed made certain to look Dudley in the eyes as it stuffed the guts into its gaping mouth. It bit down with a sated moan and tore the intestines apart with its hands and teeth.

Dudley moaned, too. He felt his gorge rising but he did nothing to prevent the bilious spray when it erupted out of him like a geyser. The creature merely laughed at his despair as it opened Rose’s neck with the glass shard. Her throat came apart like wrapping paper. The thing squealed happily and plunged its face into the freshly cut wound. It lapped up the running, spurting blood like a kid at a water fountain.

Dudley tried to cry out, to vocally demand his god explain how this could happen, but the blackness was already creeping in from the corners of his vision. He was blacking out, but he invited it. It was better to be insensate when it came. His final thought before the darkness took him was a kind of farewell.

Goodbye, Rosie. I’ll see you very soon.

The meat is tough and gamey, difficult to separate from the tendons that hold it all so firmly to the bone. She does not find this terribly troublesome; it is just as well to chew it where it hangs. Her appetite seems insatiable, her hunger unending. It is merely the work of an hour to reduce the woman to skin and skeleton, yet still she drools at the prospect of tasting the man's flesh as well. Using the long, thick shard that came from the window she'd broken downstairs, she falls upon him and instantly starts cutting. The flabby, wrinkly skin around his neck comes apart with no trouble at all—it is like cutting leather with a pair of sharp shears. The tougher cartilaginous matter beneath is a different story. Now she must saw, raking the jagged edge over the raw cords until her shoulder and elbow burn from the exertion. It pays off in the end. She has cut down to the bare spinal column. Skin and tendons and ragged, severed arteries hang and squirt all around it. A moment later and she has managed to break the last connection between head and torso. The meat here is stringy but the blood still hot and thick it deliciously slides down her throat like corn pudding. She smiles and licks her lips before flinging the head up onto the bed and sinking her face into wide, dark hole between the dead man's shoulders.

The taste is divine.

Walt cursed at the second tree trunk he slammed into, but he still did not slow his pace. He had never actually been to the old man's house, much less seen it. Finding it in the dead of night was not the easiest task and time was running out. If indeed it had not already run out. He sped on, dodging trunks and naked branches as best he could until finally he emerged from the woods. Walt sucked the cold air in through his nose and peered out over the low, grassy hill before him.

Right at the bottom of the hill. He raced up it.

From the summit of the hill, Walt could make out the shadowed edges of a three-story farmhouse below. Dudley Chapel's house. A single square of yellowish-white glowed on the third story.

"Let me be wrong," Walt whispered to himself between heaving breaths. "Please god let me be wrong about this."

He pumped his legs and fanned out his arms for balance as he scrambled down the hill and toward the house. A small pen came into view beside it; three or four hogs lay huddled in a pile in the mud there. In front of the house an ancient Chevy pickup was parked, all rounded corners and rusted green paint. Dudley must have been driving that heap for decades. Old folks were always so resistant to change, to anything new at all.

I'll bet they've never seen anything like Gwyn. That's got to be new to them.

Walt's breath hitched. He hurried to the front door. It was locked. Walt straightened his back and pounded a fist on the door, hard and fast.

"Dudley? Dudley, it's Walt Blackmore! I live in the house over the hill? Dudley! I need to see you—it's an emergency!"

No lights came on. No footsteps sounded from the other side of the door. Walt kept pounding, but nothing came of it. He wondered if they were just incredibly heavy sleepers, or if perhaps they were on some sort of medication that knocked them out cold at night.

Or if Gwyn had already come, and now there was no one left to answer the door.

Panic swelled in his chest, twisted his stomach. *How could she do this? Does she have no concept of consequences at all? Even if she gets away with it, what if I'm arrested? Who will feed her then?*

Walt backed away from the front door and began to scan the front of the house in a frantic search for another way in. That was when he finally saw the broken window above a copse of rhododendron bushes. It was not merely cracked, but smashed apart. Someone broke into the place.

Someone. Gwyn.

Walt shrugged his jacket off and used it as a leather shield as he climbed over the bushes and through the obliterated window. He tumbled over a plush-top window seat and rolled onto a dusty carpet beneath it. Holding his breath, he listened to the house. It was a

creaky old farmhouse with at least two clocks clicking out of time with one another nearby. But Walt heard nothing indicative of a struggle, much less terror and death. He let his breath out and got to his feet. He thought he heard something skittering in an adjacent room, but he wasn't sure. Probably just a cat or something. He moved on.

Halfway across the next room something brushed across the top of Walt's head. He flinched and threw up a hand to wave it off; it was only a jointed cord dangling from an overhead light. Walt gave it a yank and a frosted globe burned bright above him, flooding the room with much needed light. Now he could see that he was in a dining room crowded with faded and nicked antique furniture. To his left was an equally ancient looking kitchen. To his right was a short, dark hall that ran alongside a staircase. Recalling the sole light he'd seen from outside the house, Walt went for the stairs.

He was only three steps up when a blood-cooling scream filled the air. It was not a scream of terror—that much was immediately evident. Rather, it was a mad howl, the sort of scream Walt would expect to hear in a turn of the century insane asylum.

Walt froze mid-step. Part of him wanted to get as far away from the source of that horrendous scream as possible. But another part of him beckoned him forward, toward the heart of the catastrophe he had no doubt he'd find upstairs. He climbed the rest of the steps, rounded the landing and hurried toward the light at the end of

the hallway. When his eyes readjusted to the sudden light in the master bedroom, Walt whimpered and fell against a worn oak bureau.

Gwyn was on the bed, kneeling in a pool of blood and human offal. Beside her lay the eviscerated corpse of a woman, her torso split open like a book. Another corpse, headless, was crumpled on the floor at the foot of the bed. Its head was behind Gwyn, resting on a pillow. It was barely recognizable amid all the blood and stringy red dross, but Walt knew to whom it belonged. It was old Dudley Chapel.

Walt moaned. "Jesus Christ..."

Gwyn's glistening crimson head jerked up as a cruel, evil smile slashed across her gore-spattered face.

"Come," she said. Her voice was abrasive and malicious. "Eat."

She slid her hands into the slippery offal and brought up handfuls of the elderly couple's entrails. "Eat, Walt. *Eat.*"

Walt spat a single, miserable sob and went spiraling out of the room. As he flew back down the dark hall to the stairs, Gwyn's pitiless laughter filled his ears. He was disgusted and frightened, but most of all Walt was worried. She was easy to contend with when she was rooted to the ceiling, but now that she was free Walt did not know how much longer he would be able to contain her. As long as she was hungry, Gwyn would stop at nothing to feed. And Gwyn was always hungry.

Walt burst through the farmhouse's front door and ran wildly for the hill, all the while forcing himself to face the fact that if he wanted to keep her at home, he was going to have to bring her meals to her.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Walt sat naked in the bathtub and ran the shower. He sat there beneath the hot spray until, half an hour later, it turned cold. Even then he let it run for several minutes before he realized just how cold it was. He then twisted the knob to shut off the water and hung a clean towel over his shoulders. It hadn't done much good. Walt felt no cleaner than he had before.

He emerged from the steamy bathroom and padded into the bedroom, leaving a trail of wet footprints in the hall. The bed was still empty and the clock read 4:45. Pretty soon the sun would come up. It would burn away the darkness Gwyn needed to sneak back home. Walt wondered if she'd make it. He also wondered why he wanted her back so badly. It was her who was dependent upon him, not the other way around. She had nothing to offer Walt, nothing at all. So why did he pine for her quick return?

Why did he actually miss her?

He scrubbed his damp hair with the towel and then tossed it in the corner of the room. From the bedroom window he could see the first hint of gray on the horizon, dawn's prologue. He sighed and stretched out on the bed, letting his head sink into the pillow and closing his eyes. In a few hours he was going to have to go to school. He was exhausted, even a little ill, but he was also a new teacher and there were impressions being

made. There was no getting out of it. A brief power nap would do him good.

Walt was well on his way to sleep when the back door squealed on its rusty hinges. He snapped back into full consciousness but kept his eyes shut. Gwyn was back. She was home. A warm tear leaked out of one eye, dampening the pillowcase.

That she was back was all that mattered to Walt. All else was forgotten.

She came into the bedroom, laughing in a throaty sort of way. Walt felt the covers pull back as she slid into bed beside him, draping one cool and sticky arm over his side. A sigh of deep satisfaction passed her lips and Walt smiled at it.

He felt strangely content.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Bored to tears, Walt straightened his back until he was uncomfortable enough to stay awake. His ninth graders were busily filling in bubbles on their exam sheets, at least for the most part. Not Hershal, naturally—the diminutive pale blonde underachiever almost certainly penciled in a straight line of all Cs, like he always did. Brandon, his partner in crime, was already asleep on his desk, drooling on the test he undoubtedly just failed. Walt frowned at them. Some kids were just hopeless. In the span of a few short years, these boys would be serving Walt his cheeseburgers from a drive-thru window, and that was if things went well for them. They'd be robbing Walt's house if things went a little less well.

The thought transformed Walt's frown into a knowing smile. He'd like to see those two failures sneak into his house late one night. See how they like coming face to face with Gwyn. Her ubiquitous grin would be the last thing either of them would ever set eyes on.

A soft titter escaped Walt's mouth. Several kids looked up from their tests, staring at him. Among them was Alice, the portly kid with the jet black bob. Walt smiled at her. She hoisted a single, well-plucked eyebrow and returned her attention to the exam.

12. By what method do Romeo and Juliet commit suicide?

Walt was certain that at least half the class would miss that one. One of the options he gave, a joke, offered “jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge” as a viable option. It was option C, so he knew at least Hershal was bound to have chosen it.

Idiot.

At the very least the school system might have allowed Walt to teach a more interesting text. Shakespeare was Shakespeare, but he much preferred *Lear* or *Othello*. Still, after the hubbub his mysterious weeklong absence had caused back in the fall, he was hardly in the position to go about demanding curriculum changes.

So Romeo and Juliet it was.

15. When the Prince asks Benvolio, “Who began this bloody fray,” to what does he refer?

Who *did* begin this bloody fray? Walt swallowed hard. It was easy enough to lay every ounce of blame at Gwyn’s feet. After all, he hadn’t put the stain there. He did not even know where she came from, much less what she was. Yet there was no denying that he cultivated the monster, even if he had not planted the seed. The option was always present to ignore it, to just let it die.

Was it?

Walt smashed her head in with a hammer. Enough to snuff anything living thing out, short of a whale. But not Gwyn.

Probably she couldn't be killed. That was the true reason for Walt's actions, as far as he was concerned. Because if she was going to grow and become whole no matter what he did, it was simply logical to make sure she was on his side.

Someone among the students cleared their throat.

Walt snapped out of his reverie and glanced up at Alice, whose arm was stretched taut above her head.

"Yes, Alice?"

"I'm finished, Mr. Blackmore. May I go to the restroom?"

"Sure."

"May I go to the library after? Until the period is over?"

Several students flashed angry looks at her. Hershhal grumbled. Brandon stirred, but he did not wake up.

"Yes, all right. But just the library."

Alice collected her things, slung her bookbag over her shoulder, and marched to the front of the room with her exam bouncing between her chubby fingers. As she handed it to Walt, he noticed the red box of Marlboro cigarettes stuffed into the netted outer pocket of Alice's bookbag. *Library, indeed*, he thought.

"Thanks," she said flatly before waddling out of the classroom.

"Tons o' fun," Hershhal muttered. It was his standard dig at Alice's weight. A few students around him giggled.

“Hershal,” Walt barked. The kid shot his ice blue eyes at his teacher.

“Uh?”

“See me after class.”

Hershal sneered, and the kids who laughed with him now laughed even more uproariously at him.

They were so quick to turn on one another. Walt thought they were not entirely unlike jackals. Illiterate, unwashed, criminal little jackals. Loathsome creatures, adolescents.

Yet, as he maintained his authoritative glare at Hershal, an epiphany occurred to Walt Blackmore.

Stupid and depraved or not, meat is meat.

Well, Walt thought, conjuring Lord Capulet, *we were born to die*.

As she rounded the corner of the gymnasium, Alice spritzed apple-scented body spray all over herself in an effort to disguise the permeating odor of cigarettes. She was no big fan of girly scents, but anything that prevented detention for the high crime of smoking on campus was well and good in her book. And, in Alice’s estimation, apple body spray was the best tool for the job. She fanned the moist cloud over her neck and chest as she came around to the front of the ugly red brick building, keeping her eyes and mouth shut.

She ran right into someone.

“Hey, watch out Chubs!”

Alice's heart dropped. It was Hershal.

"Sorry," she mumbled as she tried to move past the smirking kid.

But Hershal hurried to catch up to her.

"Perfume and smokes," he gibed. "Don't go too well together."

"It's not perfume."

"Yeah? What is it, then?"

"It's none of your business, Hershal."

"Now *that's* not very nice."

Alice drew her brows together into a scowl.

"Leave me alone, will you?"

"Hey! I just wanted to thank you is all."

Alice stopped walking across the quad. She was halfway between the gym and the cafeteria entrance to the main building. A few minutes ago she'd been famished, but now her appetite was suddenly waning.

Hershal was a bad kid and everybody knew it, teachers included. It was an inexplicable miracle that he'd never gotten himself booted out of school for just a quarter of the shenanigans he pulled, usually with his lackey Brandon in tow. It began with pulling the girls' gym shorts down in grade school, escalated to routine busts for grass and alcohol in junior high, and just that year rumors started circulating that the nasty little monster raped a girl at a barn party. Naturally, nothing came of it. Hershal pretty much always got away Scot free, no matter what he did.

Now that he was expressing an inane desire to “thank” Alice, she felt anxiety creeping in. Nothing good ever came of encounters with this sociopath.

“All right, I’ll bite. Thank me for what?”

“Getting me in trouble.”

“I didn’t get you in trouble. I haven’t paid any attention to you in weeks.”

“Well, I might have made a little comment when you ditched class for the *library*. Mr. Blackmore didn’t take very kindly to it, so I got in trouble.”

“I’ll bet I can just guess what you said.”

She’d heard it a hundred times before. A thousand. *Tons o’ fun!* It never failed to elicit peals of laughter from Hershal’s bosom buddy Brandon, who was not so skinny himself. But of course, it was different for girls. Everything was.

“Nevermind that,” Hershal said with a serious look. “Turns out, the old prick gave me a choice.”

“That so?”

“Yeah. He said I can do a week’s detention, seven AM in the cafeteria every day starting Monday. I said I thought that sucked.”

“You told him that?”

“Sure I did.”

“You’re cruising.”

“Ah, fuck it. Fuck *him*. Anyway, then I get the second option.”

Alice winced, certain she was about to hear about the sort of thing she heard on the news all the time but had

never seen in front of her eyes. Mr. Blackmore was blackmailing Hershal for sexual favors?

“Said I can drop by his house. Tonight.”

“Oh, shit.”

“That’s what I said. I’m thinking this old faggot wants to ream me. I mean, I was about to knock that queer right out of his fucking chair!”

Alice shook her head and clicked her tongue. She was not particularly enthused by Hershal’s abundant use of homophobic epithets—the closest girls like her ever got to the opposite sex was by way of gay boys—but a perverted pedophile English teacher was another can of worms altogether.

“Did you go straight to Principal Byrne?”

“Fuck no, I didn’t. Blackmore didn’t say anything gross, not yet anyways. He said he wants me to know *Romeo and Juliet* like the back of my hand before he makes me retake the goddamn test. You believe that shit?”

Alice said, “Hmm.” It still did not sound right to her. Not in the least. A teacher asking a student to visit his house? Alone? Nothing good could come of that.

“I don’t know, Hershal. Sounds...skeevy.”

“One, I’m not letting any fudgepacker within a county mile of my shithole.”

He was counting off on his fingers. Alice resumed her sneer.

“And two, this is a winning situation for me. And, I think, maybe for you.”

"I don't even want to ask," Alice said testily. "In fact, all I want to do is eat my lunch. *Alone*."

"Far be it from me to get between a big girl and her lunch," Hershal said snidely. "But why don't you hear me out first."

A long, heavy sigh spilled out of Alice's mouth.

"Can you make it quick?"

"Jesus, you are hungry."

Alice glowered at him as she curled her right hand into a tight fist. One more remark like that was all she needed...

"Okay, here it is. I'm going to rob him."

"What? Who?"

"Who do you think, dummy? Blackmore."

"You're going to rob our English teacher."

"Ain't that what I just said?"

Before she could stop herself, Alice erupted into laughter. In a way, she was glad for the unintended punchline; it made the bad medicine of having to waste time talking to the mean little gnome go down much smoother. As for Hershal, he was presently far less amused. He furrowed his brow at Alice's mirth.

"Knock it off," he growled. "I'm dead serious."

"I know you are," Alice managed between gasps for breath. "That's what makes it so funny."

"You don't think I could pull it off?"

"Of course not. I mean, no offense, but you're what? A straight D student?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

“Just that thieves are supposed to be smart. The dumb ones always wind up in jail.”

“Ah, I get it. You think I’m dumb? You think I’m going to end up in stir?”

“That about the size of it, yeah.”

Alice’s smile faded instantly. She hoped Hershal failed to make anything out of her “size” comment.

He didn’t.

“Okay, just watch me. I was going to cut you in because I could use a wingman, but fuck that. I’m going in solo.”

“Yeah? What about Brandon?”

Hershal blew a sharp puff of air through his nose.

“You kidding? B’s functionally retarded.”

“At least we can agree on one thing.”

“I *guess*,” Hershal groused.

Alice shook her head again and made for the cafeteria door. Hershal reached out and grabbed her hard by the wrist.

“Hey!”

“Since you’re not interested in my offer, you had better keep your fat mouth shut, got it?”

“Let go of my wrist!”

“You hear me?”

“I heard you!”

“Keep it zipped, Chubs. I mean it.”

“All right!”

Alice wrenched her arm free from the little guy's grip. With a snarl and a roll of the eyes, she hustled into the cafeteria.

Asshole, she thought.

Hershal just grinned stupidly and watched her until she disappeared into the lunchtime crowd.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Forgoing actually looking at them, Walt stuffed all of the exams from the day in his briefcase. There were seventy-three of them: the total of his first, third and fourth period students. Walt sincerely doubted there would be more than five A level tests in the lot. He had no intention of finding out tonight, either.

Tonight he was booked.

As the latches on his briefcase snapped shut, a familiar figure filled the doorway to his left. Short and round, pudgy arms crossed tightly over her enormous breasts and the black *Dimmu Borgir* tee shirt that was stretched tightly across them.

Alice.

All of her tee shirts bore screened images of monsters and demons and nude women beneath emblazoned logos of loud metal groups with threatening names. Teenagers were nothing if not predicable.

“Mr. Blackmore?”

Walt fought back an exasperated sigh.

“Yes, Alice.”

“Can I ask you something?”

Walt clenched his jaw and checked his wristwatch. 3:45. If he left that instant, he might not get home until closer to five. And with that awful Hershal kid coming around at 5:30...

“Can it wait? It’s just, I’ve got this...meeting.”

Alice said, “Um.”

Walt forced a smile, trying to make it as genuine looking as possible.

“Tomorrow, okay?”

The girl nodded sadly. Her bob bounced slightly.

Walt grabbed the briefcase, patted Alice gently on the shoulder and then vanished into the hallway.

Walt pulled into his driveway at 4:40. He smiled at the digital clock built into the dash. Plenty of time. He grabbed his briefcase, locked the car and headed into the house.

She was lounging on the couch, completely naked. Walt had asked her to wear something, just sweats, but she consistently refused. He also requested she lay something down on the couch to keep her seeping scabs from staining the fabric, but that too fell on deaf ears. There was just no arguing with a woman like Gwyn.

During the couple of months since she emerged from her place in the ceiling, Gwyn’s skin slowly started to grow in. But it was more like healing than growing—by November her entire body was encased in soft, leathery lesions. Now, two weeks to Christmas, the large, octagonal scabs were hard and flaky. And they *leaked*. They leaked everywhere and on everything she touched. Bed sheets could be washed, and he did not mind that at all. Walt liked sleeping beside Gwyn at night. But the damn couch...

When she heard the front door creak open, she bolted upright and twisted so that she could face him. Several scabby chunks snapped off of her neck and shoulder with the rapid motion. They drifted down to the couch as the pink, freshly bared areas of raw flesh oozed whitish fluid.

“Walt!” she hungrily called out.

He smiled and set the briefcase down by the door. Her voice was so much nicer now. Feminine. Not really scratchy at all, like it had been. Maybe *breathy*, like Kathleen Turner. He guessed that her vocal cords had healed, too.

“Good news,” Walt said as he approached Gwyn on the couch. She arched her neck and lifted her chin. More scabs pulled apart wherever her skin stretched. Walt bent at the waist and pressed his lips firmly to hers. They were dry and scaly, but the kiss lingered for a several long seconds before he came back up for air. “We’re having a guest tonight.”

Gwyn’s frosty eyes widened.

“Tonight?”

“That’s right.”

“Walt! Who?”

“The worst kid in school, probably. A real piece of work.”

“What is he, a huge biker?” Gwyn licked her lips as she considered the possibilities.

Walt crooked his mouth to one side. “Well, no. He’s just a little guy. Looks like he stopped growing around sixth grade.”

Gwyn’s eyelids slid back down to their normal position. But her eager grin remained.

“That’s all right. That’s good. I didn’t expect...*tonight!*”

Walt checked his watch. “Pretty soon, actually. You might want to make yourself scarce before too long.”

Her lips contracted to cover her shiny white teeth.

“Oh, *Walt...*”

“Now don’t get like that. You *know* you can’t be seen when he’s here.”

“You are ashamed of me.”

“That’s not true, and you know it. But you’re my little secret, Gwyn. You’re special, beyond that even. You’re a miracle.”

“I am a monster.”

“Not at all. Out there—” Walt pointed vaguely at the bay window overlooking the porch. “—are where monsters be. Millions of them. But not in here. Never here.”

Gwyn’s smile gradually stretched back across her face.

“Kiss me, Walt.”

He sat down beside her on the couch and wrapped an arm around her coarse, scaly back. Tugging her close to him, Walt then pried Gwyn’s lips apart with his own and began exploring her mouth with his tongue. Softly

moaning, she pulled back until she was lying down on the couch. She spread her arms out like wings. Then her legs. Walt gaped at her flaking, scabrous shell, how it completely encased her breasts and disappeared into a fine, dark line between her rusty brown, leprous legs.

“*Now*, Walt.”

Walt swallowed a mouthful of saliva and shook his head.

“Can’t. Not just yet.”

“*Now*.”

“That kid, he’ll be here any minute. Besides, I’ve got to do the pit.”

“There’s time.”

“There’s *not*. *NOW!*”

Gwyn’s mouth twisted into a cruel and threatening sneer. Her eyes bulged, the pale blue of her irises framed by wildly branching bloodshot veins. Walt stiffened.

“Darling, if he sees you as soon as he comes in, you won’t get any supper. You’ll go hungry, see? Can’t we wait, and have it both ways?”

Gwyn let out a low, guttural growl. Her *old* voice, raspy and more than a little unsettling.

“There is meat upstairs,” she grumbled.

“No, Gwyn. No. Not her.”

“In the attic...”

“She’s my *sister*, darling.”

“So tender. So *succulent*.”

Gwyn’s pink tongue darted out, licked her scab encrusted lips.

“No! The kid will be here. Just a little longer, and then you can feed.”

Gwyn’s eyes narrowed to slits. She bared her teeth like an angry mongrel dog.

“I will have him,” she hissed.

Walt nodded vigorously. She pulled her legs up and dropped them to the floor. Then she hopped up and made for the back of the house, her fingers splayed out like talons.

“And then I will have *you*,” she snarled as she vanished from Walt’s view.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

"It can't be this far," Brandon grouched.

"It's gotta be," Hershal argued. "Directions say ten miles down Highway 5. We haven't gone five, yet."

"Why the hell's he wanta live out here, anyway? This is hillbilly country. Sheepfuckers and shit."

Hershal chortled.

"Sheepfuckers," he mimicked.

"It's true. Knew a guy in eighth grade lived out this way. Swear to god his name was Elvis. Everybody knew him because it got out he boned a sheep on his uncle's farm."

"That's nasty."

"Of course it's nasty. But there it is. This is sheepfucker country."

"Well, we'll just have to wait and see if Blackmore's got any sheep."

"Nah," Brandon protested. "Teach's no hucklebuck." He steadied the wheel with his left hand while he fished a joint of his shirt pocket with the other. "But dollars to doughnuts he fucks his sister."

"Hah!"

Hershal burst into peals of phlegmy laughter.

"Bet they got kids together!" Brandon went on. "They all got one eye each and no hair. Fuckin' incest babies."

"You're gross, man."

"And they got babies *with* the babies, too."

“Stop it! You’re going to make me barf, dude.”

“Just calling ‘em like I see ‘em.”

“Gross.”

Brandon chuckled evilly. He delighted in appalling people, especially Hershal. He was the hardest one to gross out, but he almost never failed. Now he grinned triumphantly as he fired up his jay with the car lighter. Hershal flipped on the dome light and peered at the directions he’d printed out.

“Turn that shit off,” Brandon grumbled.

“Just a sec. In a few minutes there’s a left turn, on Hawthorne. It’s not too much farther up there before we hit Blackmore’s pad, so we gotta take it slow. I’ll get out before we’re too close so you can circle around and hang tight.”

“Yeah, I know, I know. Jesus, you think I’m stupid?”

“Pretty goddamn stupid, sure.”

“Fuck you, man.”

“In your dreams, faggot.”

Brandon slammed down on the brake pad and the car shuddered to sudden stop. Hershal lurched forward, narrowly missing a collision with the dashboard because, for once, he had his seatbelt on.

“The hell, man?”

“What’d you say to me?”

“Nothing, B. Shit—it was a joke. I was *joking*.”

“Take it back.”

“What do you mean, take it back? I was just ribbing you, man. Fuck’s sake, can’t you take a joke?”

“I dunno, can you take a mouthful of broken teeth?”

Hershal stared, shaken but not to terribly surprised. Brandon *could* take a joke, most of the time, but not when it came to the gay stuff. He drew the line there. Hershal never knew why, and clearly he forgot all about it most of the time, but at times like these it all came crashing back down on him. *Don't make fag jokes with B.*

“All right, I'm sorry. Okay?”

Brandon glared at him, the dome light creating weirdly long shadows across his face. It made him seem more menacing than usual.

“I said I take it back.”

“You'd goddamn better.”

“I said I did!”

Brandon grunted. Then, after a few awkward seconds of silence, he switched off the dome light and gently tapped the gas. The car rolled on down Highway 5, and neither of the teenage boys inside said another word.

After making sure that the backyard security light was off, Walt quietly slipped outside. He shone the flashlight in his hand around the back of the house until he located the dusty blue tarp. Pulling it down, Walt exposed the wheelbarrow and shovel he kept hidden underneath. Then he turned and shone the light across the dry, brown lawn where another large blue tarp was laid out.

He placed the shovel on top of the dusty white mound in the wheelbarrow and pushed it over to the second tarp. He'd neglected to put on his dust mask this time, but there was hardly time to go back for it now. Walt resolved to try not to breathe it in. The last thing he wanted was a lungful of quicklime.

With his lips clenched tight and his breath held in his chest, Walt yanked the tarp to the side and revealed the pit.

The sour, acerbic odor slammed his senses right away. There was nothing like putrid human tissue being slowly dissolved in quicklime to wake someone up, and quick. Walt gasped.

When he got re-acclimated to the shock of the pit's offensive stench, Walt pointed the flashlight down into it. The lime was doing its job, albeit very gradually. There was little more than porous bone left now, nothing compared to the gruesome horror that once lay in there.

When Amanda passed away, her remains were of little use to Gwyn. The gangrene had spread throughout her right leg, ruining all of it and tainting much of the surrounding flesh. The blood was no good, either. Walt doubted if Gwyn had managed to eat a quarter of Amanda's meat. The rest got tossed into the pit and covered up with the quicklime Walt bought at the hardware store in town. Then went Margaret's remains, which by then were nothing but the bones. Gwyn had a feast for herself with that one.

Margaret elicited no tears from Walt. He barely knew her and never much liked the austere woman. For Amanda, contrarily, Walt cried at the edge of the pit more often than not. Although lately, that had begun to taper off. He was moving on, getting used to his new situation. Life without Amanda. Life with Gwyn.

He did not cry now as he scooped a shovelful of lime over the decaying skeletons in his backyard corpse pit. Not for Amanda, certainly not for Margaret, and not for two stray dogs he'd lured into his yard with promised of fresh red meat. They got crushed skulls for their trouble. Gwyn complained about the flavor and texture. Naturally, she demanded only the best. She had to have human meat.

When Walt was satisfied that the pit was in good shape, he recovered it with the tarp, replaced the shovel in the wheelbarrow and pushed it back to the house. He almost groaned knowing he was going to have to repeat the process in a few short hours, but he was relieved that it was all for a good cause. Gwyn could finally—if only temporarily—be sated, and satiation meant relative sanity. Sarah could live another day without having to worry about Gwyn's ever-growing lust for the hot blood in her veins. And Walt would finally be rid of one of the nastiest thorns in his paw: that bile-inducing rotten apple, Hershal.

That was enough to slow his thudding heart, and even induce a slight upturn at the corners of his mouth,

as Walt wiped his hands on his slacks and went back inside.

Sarah wanted to turn on her side, but she was afraid of reopening the sundry cuts on her back. They were only just beginning to heal up, so she was willing to sacrifice a modicum of comfort in favor of not worsening the wounds. Besides, ever since Walt hauled the twin mattress up to the attic—soiled and smelly though it was—resting was a considerably simpler task for Sarah. It certainly beat stretching out over itchy fiberglass and hard, splintery beams.

Not that it eased the raging hatred Sarah felt for her brother. One stinky mattress for an unwilling captive and blood donor a friend did not make. She doubted she could ever stop detesting him even if the son of a bitch killed that disgusting beast and set her free.

But of course all that blood-chilling moaning and growling that filled the otherwise quiet night air did anything but suggest an end to this nightmare. What it *did* suggest was that Walt was actually having sex with that thing. As far as Sarah could determine, that meant he was lost to her forever. She was on her own from here on out.

*Why don't they just kill me and get it over with?
Why keep me alive?*

Sarah hated herself for asking that question, mainly because she knew the horrifying answer from the

lepidote lips of the creature itself. One of the first times it crept up into the attic on its own, while Walt was away, it peeled Sarah's scabs off and split the skin apart. Then, when it was done lapping at the blood that oozed from Sarah's hot, painful wounds, it hissed at her.

"My tasty...little...bloooooo cowww..."

Sarah shivered at the memory. It was then that it dawned on her that she was going to be kept as a sanguinary reserve until further notice, or until the monster grew too hungry to wait for the next poor bastard Walt brought along for it.

So those were her options. Her future. Either she'd be torn asunder by a flesh eating monstrosity or bled in the attic until her body just gave up.

Sarah forsook her prior decision and rolled over onto her side. Nearly two dozen two and three inch scabs ripped apart from the small of her back to the tops of her shoulders. And as they began to bleed anew, Sarah wept.

Chapter Forty

“Out.”

Brandon did not look at Hershal when he barked the order. Hershal sneered, ready to lay into his friend, but thought better of it. Brandon was no great fighter, but he had an easy eighty pounds on Hershal. Little guys like him needed to choose their fights carefully, and this one just wasn't worth it.

So, Hershal complied. He gently opened the passenger side door, climbed out the car, and gently shut it again. Almost instantly Brandon rolled slowly away, leaving Hershal in the near total darkness of the outlying country road. The only light he could make out apart from the dim sliver of moon and the few stars uncovered by threatening black clouds was the yellow porch light in the distance. Blackmore's house.

He started walking.

At the hesitant knock, Walt turned from the snack he was preparing in the kitchen and went to the front door. He unlocked the deadbolt and opened the door to reveal the small fourteen year old boy on his porch. Hershal gazed up at Walt with dead, emotionless eyes. The kid was shivering; his thin tan jacket was clearly insufficient protection from the frigid December air.

“Come in, Hershal.”

The boy hurried into the warmth of the foyer without a word. Walt shut the door behind him. He turned the deadbolt.

"I was just putting a snack together. Do you like crackers and cheese? I'm fairly sure there's a summer sausage around here someplace."

Hershal frowned.

"Not really hungry."

"No? Well, more for me, then. I'm going to put some coffee on, too, but I guess you're probably too young to like that."

"Got any beer?"

Walt snickered.

"Nice try, Hershal."

"What? My dad lets me drink beer all the time, no problem."

Walt wanted to say, *I don't doubt that at all*, but he held his tongue. Instead, he silently returned to the kitchen and began preparing the coffee. He scooped two spoonfuls of grounds into the basket, filled the carafe with water from the tap and then poured that into the machine. Once it started to sputter and drip, Walt leaned against the counter and smiled at Hershal. The kid was still frowning.

"Sure you don't want that snack?"

"Said I'm not hungry," Hershal grouchily replied.

"Okay. Then I guess we should get started. When are your folks picking you up? Are they here?"

"I took a cab."

“A cab? What for? That must’ve cost fifty dollars or more.”

“No skin off my ass.”

Walt narrowed his eyes as emitted a small laugh.

“All right, then. Do you have any questions before we begin?”

Hershal crooked his head to one side and raised an eyebrow.

“About what?”

“The play. *Romeo and Juliet*?”

“Sure—I got a question.”

“Shoot.”

“Why do I gotta read dumb shit like this anyways? I mean, what good is it? I’m never going to be like you. I’ll probably just sign up with the Army or the Marines soon as I’m outta school. Think this faggy Shakespeare crap’s gonna get me out of a firefight in Fallujah or some place?”

“No,” Walt bewilderedly admitted. “I don’t suppose that it would.”

“I mean, the world needs ditch diggers too, right?”

“That it does. But that doesn’t necessarily mean you have to be one, Hershal.”

“What if I *want* to? Is that a crime?”

“Not in the least. But even ditch diggers can appreciate literature.”

“You can feed me all the turds you want, Mr. Blackmore, but that don’t mean I gotta like it.”

Walt smiled. A quiet and somewhat tense minute passed. Then Walt went over to the refrigerator, opened it up, and grabbed something from inside.

“Heads up,” he said as he tossed a can of Lone Star to Hershal.

The boy caught it with a wet slap against his hand. He gaped with disbelief. When Walt closed the fridge, he had a can of beer in his own hand, as well. He cracked it open and held it up.

“Bottoms up,” he said with a mischievous grin.

Hershal face beamed like he’d just won the lottery and lost his virginity at the same time. He was quick to pop his can open and take a long swig that he finished up with a drawn out sigh.

“Good shit,” Hershal said.

Walt laughed. “Glad you like it.”

“You’re not so bad, Mr. B. For a teacher and shit.”

“Thanks, Hershal. That means a lot.”

Hershal enjoyed another guzzling swig and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “So, we’re done with this Romeo crap? I mean, you get me, right?”

“Sure, Hershal. I get you.”

“Solid.”

The hardwood floor creaked somewhere on the other side of the house. To Walt it sounded like it came from the dining area. Walt tried his best to ignore it, and Hershal did not seem to notice it at all. He was too busy snagging cheese-laden crackers from the plate on the kitchen island.

"I thought you weren't hungry," Walt said as he moved his eyes from the dimly lit living room back to Hershal.

"I dunno; beer gives me the munchies sometimes."

Another creak. Closer.

Hershal darted his eyes in the direction of the dining area. Walt stiffened.

"I'd better get that summer sausage out, then," he said a little too loudly.

"Nah," the boy said as he returned his dull gaze to Walt. "This here's fine."

"Whatever you say."

Creak.

Brandon parked the car a hundred yards down the road from Blackmore's house and killed the engine. The abrupt silence in the wake of his rumbling engine was oddly jarring. He could hear his own pulse thumping in his ears. There weren't even crickets chirping outside. Just the cold, still air of the backwoods night.

The clock in the dash had read 5:40 when he stopped the car. That gave Brandon plenty of time to get moving; more than enough. He thought about firing up another jay, but settled for a Kool instead. He wanted to keep his mind as clear as possible for what was coming up.

A robbery. The thought of it alone thrilled him, set his heart to slamming against his ribcage. It also terrified him. Brandon had gotten himself mixed up with some

reasonably wild misadventures, especially since he hooked up with Hershal at the start of the school year, but nothing quite bordering on a felony. Not until now. They'd spray-painted *COCKSUCKER* on the I-30 overpass by the Pentecostal Church that one night, and there was the time he stood lookout while Hershal bored a hole in the wall between the boys' and girls' locker rooms at school. Brandon never thought anything would get better than that, not after seeing a good quarter of the ninth and tenth grade girls' tits in one fell swoop. Yet even though there were no girls concerned this time around, a real, honest-to-Christ home robbery somehow trumped it all.

Particularly since it involved ripping off that shithead Blackmore.

Brandon licked his lips and sucked at the menthol cigarette. As soon as he was finished with it, he'd sneak over to the house, case the joint and have a look inside. Then he'd wait for Hershal to signal him, let him know what to do next. They had to play it by ear, neither of them having been there before. They didn't know Blackmore's routines or even what all he owned. But before too long, that dumb bastard was going to be kicking himself for being so smug and stupid all the damn time.

Brandon sniggered between drags on the Kool. Then he flicked it out the window and stepped out of the car.

"Showtime," he said.

Chapter Forty-One

Walt pulled another can of Lone Star from the fridge, cracked it open and handed it to Hershal. The boy gulped a third of it down before belching and then muttering, "Thanks."

"No problem," Walt said. He had not gotten another beer for himself.

Hershal guzzled as another floorboard creaked behind him. He stopped in mid-swallow and his eyes drifted toward the source of the sound.

"What was that?"

"What was what?"

"Is there somebody else here?"

"No. Just me. Well, and you."

"Oh."

Creak.

Hershal knitted his brow.

"It's an old house. It makes a lot a little noises, especially at night. Me, I kind of like it that way."

"I think it's creepy as shit."

"Different strokes."

"I guess..."

After he polished off his beer, Hershal squashed the can in his fist and set it down on the island counter. It wobbled for a bit, throwing a tinny echo around the kitchen. When it stopped, it was replaced by an awkward silence. Neither Hershal nor Walt spoke, ate

or drank. They only stared uncomfortably at one another.

“Well, if that’s it...”

“Wait, you don’t want to talk about anything?”

Walt stepped forward, his eyes a little too wide for Hershal’s comfort. The boy winced and stepped back.

“Talk? No. I think I’d best be going...”

“Aren’t you maybe worried a little about your grade, Hershal? I mean, let’s be honest—you aren’t doing so well in English. I’ll bet your other subjects are suffering, too. It might not seem like such a big deal right now, but down the road...”

Hershal curled his hands into fists and adopted a defensive stance. His nervous expression gave way to one of rage.

“I knew it!” he bellowed. “I fucking knew it!”

Walt gaped.

“You knew what?”

“I knew you was a queer, that’s what! You don’t give a shit about no *Shakespeare*, you just want to get with young boys!”

“No! That’s not...no!”

“Fucking sick, man!”

“You’ve got this all wrong, kid.” Walt apologetically displayed his palms. “It’s not like that.”

“Yeah? A teacher, who lives by himself, has a fourteen year old dude come to his house? At night? And then you’re all like, *how about them grades, Hershal?* Well, I ain’t letting some nasty old homo touch

my dick for an A in his stupid goddamn English class, I'll tell you that!"

Creak.

"I ought to kick your ass!" Hershal raged on. "I ought to curb stomp your ass, is what I should do!"

"Okay, calm down..."

"No! Fuck you, man! I'm getting the hell out of here. *Then* I'm calling the cops!"

Creak. Creak.

"The cops! Now, come..."

"You know what they do to child molesters in prison, *Walter*? They kill 'em! They fucking kill 'em!"

Creak.

"What the hell *is* that?!"

His face red and sweaty and his breath coming short and fast, Hershal spun around to face the direction of the creaking. He shrieked.

"Hello, Hershal," Gwyn whispered through clenched teeth.

Hershal sucked in a gasp of air and froze. The reddish-brown creature in front of him grinned broadly and licked its jagged, scab-encrusted lips. The boy wanted to cry out, to ask Blackmore to help him.

But it was Walt Blackmore who slammed two laced fists into Hershal's temple, knocking him to the floor and making the world brown out around him.

The last thing he heard was a low, raspy chortling.

* * *

Brandon crouched outside of the darkened window and rubbed his cold hands together, occasionally exhaling warm, white steam into them. He could not remember if it had been this cold when he and Hershal set out, but he didn't think it was. It was cold, to be sure, but now it was downright *frigid*. The stagnant air bit at his face. He hoped he wouldn't have to sit out there much longer.

What's taking him so long?

He could faintly hear murmuring, voices talking. Hershal and Blackmore, just chatting it up while Brandon was freezing to death outside.

He briefly wondered if he'd been the object of a prank, if the whole robbery thing was bullshit and Hershal would end up laughing his head off that Brandon sat out there half the night, waiting to be let in.

But Brandon decided that his buddy wouldn't do that. Not to him, anyway.

So he waited.

If it had not been so cold, he might have nodded off.

He nearly did, anyway.

Until he heard an ear-splitting scream, shortly followed by a hollow *thump*.

Shit! What was that?

Brandon pulled himself up to the window and tried to look inside. All he could see was pitch black darkness. It could have been a curtain, but it was too dark to tell. He sank back down to a crouch.

Shit! Shit, shit, shit!

His heart thudding and cold beads of sweat forming on his face, Brandon bounced on his heels while he tried to decide what to do. If it was Blackmore who screamed, then all there was to do was wait. Hershal had it under control. But what if it was Hershal? Or somebody else? Brandon did not know if Blackmore was married, or if he had any kids. He was relatively certain a douchebag like that lived alone, but one could never be sure. The thing of it was, he had no way of knowing *who* screamed in the house.

He had no choice. He had to investigate.

Once more, Brandon pushed himself up to a standing position and then flattened himself against the cold aluminum siding that covered the outside of the house. He listened, but he heard nothing more than his own short breaths. Keeping his body pressed against the side of the house, he began sidestepping toward the front, where the porch light glowed orange in the otherwise ink black night.

Through the frosted bay window he saw two indistinct figures moving around inside. One of them bobbed up and down, waving its arms. The other seemed to just watch and did not move at all.

Hershal and Blackmore?

Brandon crept by the window and continued to peer in, but all he could make out were blurry silhouettes through the dense crystals of frost. The active one was relatively short and thin, not altogether *unlike* Hershal. But it was impossible to be sure. And Brandon couldn't

think of a good reason the kid should be flailing around that way.

Staying low and flush with the house, he snuck across the porch to the front door. The globe around the light hung directly over the door. Dozens of small black spots were backlit inside of it. Summer's dead bugs. He frowned at them, reminded of how he always puzzled at them when he was younger. It never made a lick of sense to him that the stupid insects would continue to climb into the death trap when all their friends and family's fried corpses were so clearly piled up in there. Brandon reckoned that must be why mankind ruled the world.

He reached up and gently grabbed the doorknob. He slowly twisted it, but discovered to his chagrin that it would not give.

"Fuck," he whispered. It was locked.

Something slammed inside, a sharp burst of sound like a belly flop in the pool. Brandon's shoulders jerked.

Then a gruff female voice screeched, "Yes! Yes, Walt! *Hurry!*"

Brandon screwed up his face.

Sex?

Is Hershal involved?

Maybe some kind of twisted three-way between Hershal, Mr. Blackmore and some broad. *Mrs. Blackmore?* Brandon puffed up his cheeks and slowly let the air out. This was getting too far out for him.

Another loud slamming cracked out.

More like an old wooden baseball bat hitting a homer, Brandon thought.

Way too far out.

Brandon took a deep breath and looked out toward the dark country road. Just a hundred yards away, his car sat in the shadows. He had the keys. There would be nothing easier in the world than skittering back to the car and getting the hell out of there. Let Hershal do what he wants. *I'm not getting naked with the goddamn English teacher.*

Brandon slowly rose and checked his front pocket for his keys. They were there, just where he put them.

It was time to go.

“Quick! Cut it off! *Give it to meeee!*”

The skin on Brandon's back tingled. He looked back at the hazy forms in the frosted window one last time, and then turned to the porch steps.

He pressed his foot down on the top step and it creaked. More carefully, he stepped on the next one more slowly.

A high-pitched squeal erupted from behind him, inside the house. Brandon lurched, lost his footing. He shouted out and tumbled down the steps, every impact pounding loudly against the wood.

Crashing footsteps raced toward him from inside the house, toward the front door.

“*Shit!*”

Brandon scrambled away from the steps, planted his palms on the cold, dead lawn and pushed himself up. He

leapt into a standing position, but his left ankle burned with pain when his weight fell on it. The ankle gave, and Brandon collapsed to the ground.

Something rattled on the porch and the front door creaked open. Partially obscured by the blinding globe of light above him, Mr. Blackmore loomed in the doorway, looking down at Brandon.

The older man gave a slight gasp. Then he started to chuckle.

“I should have known,” Blackmore said merrily.

Chapter Forty-Two

The kid was sprawled out on the lawn, his neck twisted so he could look up at Walt.

“Tad chilly out here, don’t you think?” Walt asked. “Come on, let’s get you inside where it’s nice and warm.”

Brandon reached out and grabbed handfuls of grass, desperately trying to claw his way forward.

“S-s-s’okay, Mr. Blackmore,” he stammered. “I was-was just going home anyways...”

“Don’t be an idiot, son,” Walt growled as he lunged for Brandon’s leg.

The boy let out a terrified squeak when Walt seized his twisted ankle and began dragging him back up the steps.

“I’ve got soup and fixings for cheese sandwiches,” the teacher droned on between huffing breaths. “Nice food for dreary weather.”

Brandon bumped and bounced over the steps. The last one caught him hard on the chin. He moaned in pain.

“It’ll be just like a snow day,” Walt went on. He was holding the door open with his rump while dragging the kid into the foyer by his foot. “Just like Christmas.”

“Please, Mr. Blackmore!” Brandon mewled frantically. “*Please!* I don’t care what you did to Hershal! I won’t tell nobody! *PLEASE!*”

The door slammed shut.

Walt released Brandon's leg and secured the deadbolt and guard chain.

Brandon rolled over on his back, sat up and saw what he'd been listening to from the other side of the front door.

A slick, glistening pile of chopped up meat and bones and guts. All dark red and pink and black. On one end was Hershal's head, his mouth hanging open and his pale eyes staring at the ceiling. His tongue lolled out of his mouth lazily, like it was just a prop he'd put there for a laugh. Surrounding the grisly, wet mound were Hershal's arms and legs. They were bare. Brandon did not see his pants, shirt, socks or shoes anywhere. But they'd stripped him. Stripped him and slaughtered him.

Perhaps most upsetting of all was the dead boy's groin, which had been split down the middle, the genitals sliced clean off. All that remained was an inverted chevron of butchered gore.

Cut it off! Give it to meeee!

A low, plaintive bray came from Brandon as his eyes darted to Walt. His teacher's pale green polo shirt was dripping blood. Walt leaned over the butchered body on the floor and came back with a huge cleaver in his hand. It, too, was dripping.

Walt grinned sheepishly and shrugged.

"The lady was hungry," he said, almost apologetically.

Brandon did not bother to wonder what that meant. Instead, he turned away from the reeking, bloody mess and retched. He vomited for what seemed like a long

time, lurching and puking in waves until his insides were completely emptied onto Walt's scuffed wood floor. For a time after that he remained bent over the massive, stinking pool of vomit, spitting out fibrous strands of chunky saliva.

"Better be careful," Walt quietly warned. "You'll ruin her appetite."

"Guh," Brandon groaned.

"All better now?"

"Guh."

Walt chuckled. He padded over to where Brandon kneeled and eased the boy away from his own sick. Brandon managed to sit up, his pink, swollen eyes leaking tears and his lips wet and shiny from all the spit and puke. Some of it had splashed back up from the floor and besmirched his faded Ghostbusters tee shirt. He did not appear to notice.

"Whew!" Walt blurted out. "You're a frightful mess. Let's get you out of those nasty clothes."

Walt leaned down to take hold of Brandon's jacket, but the kid jerked away. He groaned pitifully.

"Ah, yes," Walt knowingly announced. "You share your late buddy's apprehensions. Please, let me set your mind at ease—I have no untoward sexual designs on you. In fact, I am very happily committed to the most incredible woman in the world. Perhaps you'd like to meet her?"

"Nuh," Brandon mumbled as he wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

He was beginning to really weep now. His chin trembled as he blubbered and whined. Walt shook his head.

“Come *on*, Brandon! You’re practically an *adult* now! Stop acting like a fucking baby!”

The boy only cried harder.

The emergence of Gwyn from the kitchen did nothing to assuage his fit, either.

“Another one...!” she gleefully hissed.

“Yes, unfortunately,” Walt groaned.

Brandon’s eyes widened as the creature stepped out of the kitchen and into the brilliant light of the foyer.

“Oh, god,” he lamented.

Gwyn gave a throaty laugh. She walked like a model, sashaying her full hips from side to side with every step closer to Brandon. Her motions were so exaggerated that hundreds of dry, brown flakes cascaded down from her furfuraceous skin, leaving a trail of scabs in her wake. Wherever the crusty pieces split away from her, light pink tissue was revealed, piece by piece. It was a slow, repulsive striptease.

“Oh, no. No, no, no, no.”

“Who is thissss one?” the scabby woman asked. She was addressing Walt, but her gaze was firmly fixed on the vomit spattered boy on the floor.

“Brandon Zuern,” Walt ruefully answered. “If that one was the worst of the lot,” (he jammed a thumb toward the carnage behind them) “then this one’s a very close second.”

Gwyn dropped quickly to a crouch when she reached the kid. She thrust her terrible face close to his and slowly stretched her mouth wide open. Brandon shuddered and emitted a quiet whimper.

“Please,” he begged.

Her tongue shot out. It was long and it glistened in the light. With a sensual moan, she pressed her tongue to Brandon’s jaw line and ran it up his face, licking and salivating on his sweaty skin. When she was done, she licked all the way up the other side. She then retracted the tongue into her mouth, shut her eyes and pursed her lips. She was savoring the flavor of him.

“Mmmm,” she intoned. “*Delicious.*”

In spite of himself, Brandon felt his crotch squirm.

Christ, he thought. *Not now!*

But he had not control over it. No matter how horrifying the bloody tableau before him was, and despite the stomach-churning sight of this abominable woman all covered with crusty, peeling scabs, the fact that she was *licking* him...

Gwyn’s tongue slid over Brandon’s lips, probing them. She shoved it into his mouth, and the boy did not resist. He trembled as she explored the inside of his mouth, licking his tongue, his teeth and the insides of his cheeks. As long as he kept his eyes squeezed shut, it was not totally unpleasant. Even a little nice. To be sure, he’d never done anything like *this* with a girl before. Now her hand slid up his leg, slowing at the thigh and gliding over his swelling groin. Brandon softly moaned

as Gwyn closed her hand around his crotch and gently squeezed. She pulled her tongue out his mouth, flicking the tip of it against his upper lip. Then the hand went away, too.

Brandon took in a sharp breath and waited for the exciting sensations to continue. When they did not, he held the air in his lungs and cracked one eye open.

Walt loomed over him now. The cleaver in his hand glinted in the light.

“Sorry, Brandon,” he said softly. “Wish you’d just stayed home.”

With that, the blade shot up high, ready to speed back down into Brandon’s skull.

Brandon gasped. Then he lunged forward and thrust his head into Walt’s groin. Walt groaned in pain and dropped the cleaver. The blade sank into the hardwood floor with a dull thud. Brandon made a tight fist and pounded it into the side of Walt’s head. With a startled mewl, Walt collapsed to the floor as Brandon leapt up to his feet.

Lurking just a few feet away, her rough, flaky hands curled into claws, Gwyn growled like a wild animal. She swiftly moved between Brandon and the front door. Brandon did not hesitate; he bolted for the back of the house, instead.

Walt grumbled something incoherent. Gwyn screamed.

Brandon could hear her huffing, her bare feet slapping rapidly against the floor as she ran after him.

He sank into the darkness of the back of the house. An instant later, he crashed against the backdoor. His fingers fumbled in the dark for the doorknob, found it and twisted the cold metal knob. It was unlocked. Brandon yanked hard, threw the door open and burst out into the frigid winter night.

The moon cast a gray sliver of dim light across the expanse of the backyard. Brandon sprinted into it, his lungs already hot and bursting from the exertion. He had to keep going; that *thing* was still close behind, hissing and scrambling after him. Between rasping breaths, it tittered and mumbled.

Brandon pumped his legs harder. Sweat seeped out of every pore in his head, instantly cooling in the freezing air and chilling his skin. He wanted to stop, to catch his breath, but he had to keep on. The dreadful image of poor Hershal, disemboweled and his dick and balls cut off, was burned into Brandon's brain. It was enough to drive him on, keep him running, in his desperate fear of meeting the same ghastly fate.

Somehow, the worst part of it all was knowing that the woman ate it. *Give it to me.* That's what they did. They killed people and cut them up and ate them.

A tiny squeak shot out of Brandon's mouth when the ground disappeared underneath his feet. He only fell for a fraction of a second, but it seemed like he was drifting through space for a while. When he landed, he sank into softness rather than slamming against hard ground. It felt a bit like sand, but less densely packed.

Brandon scurried in the low place, losing his sense of which way was up and which was down. He kicked his legs and thrust his arms out. He felt like he was in the middle of the ocean in the dead of night. One hand rubbed against the slick, muddy wall of the hole he must have fallen into. Another sank deeper into the sandy morass around him, stopping when his fingers pressed against something hard. He felt around for its boundaries, determined that it was round and not too big to pull out. Brandon figured it might be good for a weapon.

Above him, pebbles and dirt skittered and rained down into the hole. The scabby woman. She roughly giggled.

“Little man,” she cooed awfully, “it’s not yet time to be down there. Don’t you know that’s where the *scraps* go?”

Brandon scowled. Finding purchase on the object in the powdery mound, he dug his fingers into it and yanked it out. It was only then that the hair tumbled down from the object’s top and coiled around Brandon’s hand and forearm. He was holding a rotting human head by its gaping eye sockets.

He shrieked and dropped the head. It smacked against the grainy surface, kicking up a cloud of the stuff. The substance floated into Brandon’s face, filling his mouth and nose and stinging his eyes. At first it was irritating. Then the burning agony set in. It was as if acid had been poured into his eyes and down his throat.

He clawed at his face, frantic to rub the smoldering powder away, but he only made it worse. His hands were covered with it, too. The acerbic powder reached his lungs, his chest contracted painfully. He could no longer breathe.

Slowly suffocating while his eyeballs burned, Brandon thrashed violently in the pit. He could neither see nor speak, but he could hear the hideous lady at the mouth of the pit cackling wildly at his death throes. His tongue swelled and protruded out of his gaping mouth. As the asphyxiation reached its crescendo, Brandon's skull felt like it was going to burst.

He was dead before he could find out if it would.

Chapter Forty-Three

Walt had expected to butcher one body that night; he'd prepared for it. Two bodies was something else altogether. It was twice the work. Plus, it was a school night. He sighed grouchily as he stripped naked in his bedroom. There just wasn't any sense in further sullyng his wardrobe.

Back in the foyer, he screwed up his mouth and shook his head at the destruction before his eyes.

It was such a nice floor. Now he'd probably have to have it replaced.

"Damn it."

Shoving the floor to the back of his mind, Walt got down to business. First he unrolled the dusty blue tarp Gwyn had dragged into the house. There lay Brandon, still and well-dusted with quicklime. The quicklime had absorbed most of the vomit, a job usually reserved for sawdust. Walt sighed and set to undressing the corpse. Once it was naked, he took a damp dishrag and wiped it down, top to bottom and back to front.

A raspy laugh came from behind him when he reached the body's flaccid genitals. He sneered.

"Very funny, Gwyn. Especially when I'm doing this for you."

The laughter died out, but only gradually. Walt dropped the rag beside Brandon's corpse and stood up.

"Come to think of it," he went on, "I don't see why you can't do it yourself. You're perfectly agile. Stronger

than me.” He picked up the cleaver and held it out to her. “Why don’t *you* cut it up this time?”

Gwyn’s lips spread apart, showing her gleaming white teeth.

“You like it.”

“Cutting up bodies? No way. It’s disgusting.”

“Taking care of me,” she said coquettishly.

Walt dropped his head slightly and smiled. She was right. He was repulsed by the bloody work of dismembering human corpses and stripping the meat from their bones, but in the end he delighted in what it meant to Gwyn. He *did* relish taking care of her, being her *au pair* with benefits. And he had no intention of stopping.

Not ever, if that’s what it took.

With a deep breath through his nostrils, Walt lifted the cleaver up over his head and brought it down with a resounding *thwack*, dead in the center of Brandon’s chest.

Chapter Forty-Four

In her usual seat in the second to last row, Alice sat alone in the classroom. She was almost always the first to arrive, having no first period to speak of, and she enjoyed the rare moments of calm silence. No one to pick on her. No horny guys to stare at her embarrassingly large breasts, or to pretend to like her just until they got a chance to actually see them, or touch them. Not that Alice was ever going to fall for *that* again.

The first time had been at the end of seventh grade; Joshua Hansen. A chubby kid himself, Joshua had not usually joined in with the others when they chanted *fatty* or *lardo* or *tubby tits*. He did call her *Alice Phallus* once, having apparently just learned the word and made the immediate connection, but luckily it never caught on. And even after that incident, she still let her guard down at the Spring Formal when he led her outside to the gravel-strewn playground and started to feel her up. The episode was awkward and vaguely humiliating, but Joshua moaned and grunted so much during the act that she allowed him to continue. He really seemed to be enjoying himself. Maybe, she thought at the time, he could even wind up her first boyfriend. Certainly the rosy-cheeked dork wasn't anyone's first choice of paramour, but she had to start somewhere.

The following Monday, word had spread like wildfire. Alice Hawkins is easy. She'll let you feel her boobs if you're just nice to her. Alice is a slut.

The legacy of Joshua Hansen.

She'd kept her head down for the rest of that school year and most of the next, but the same song played for Alice twice more during eighth grade and once at the beginning of the present year. That last one went further. Much further. "All the way," as Brandon Zuern told everybody in a ten mile radius after the fact, and with much the same results as her encounter with Joshua.

Alice thought she'd never stop crying. But she did. And she made up her mind that boys were revolting, no exceptions, and that she was on her own from here on out. Then came Adiel Gallagher. She wasn't a boy. But the mere thought of her made Alice flush hot with shame and confusion.

She opened her composition book up to the midway point, to the page where she'd left off a blue ballpoint sketch of a dragon exploding out of the roof of a building. The building bore an uncanny resemblance to the school. The charred and flaming bodies splayed all around the building's perimeter could have been anyone, but she knew who they were. Two of them—one impaled on one of the dragon's teeth, the other dangling from the sharp tip of one of the beast's claws—possessed particular identities in Alice's mind. They were Hershal and Brandon, neither of the nondescript figures specifically one or the other. Just like they were in real life, the nasty boys were interchangeable.

Now she worked on some of the finer details: the dragon's scales, the building's bricks, the dancing flames and the shadows they formed. All of it in blue, against a backdrop of faint, straight blue lines.

Maybe it's my blue period, she thought.

The classroom door jerked open and two of Alice's classmates filed in. Naturally, neither of them made eye contact with her, even though she smiled and looked them straight in the faces. She quietly sighed.

Back to my dragon.

Soon, more kids started to fill up the room. Mr. Blackmore was not far behind. He was shuffling papers on his desk and half the students were shouting and wandering around the room when the bell rang. Alice kept her eyes on the drawing.

"All right," Mr. Blackmore croaked. "Let's settle down."

Alice tore her gaze away from the raging beast in her composition book and looked up at the teacher. He looked terrible. His face was drawn and pale, his eyes dark and puffy underneath. Practically the spitting image of her stepdad when he was hungover after a bender in town. All except for the massive bandage wrapped tautly around his right hand. Alice furrowed her brow.

"I don't know about you," Blackmore droned on, "but I could use a quiet day. For that reason, I've brought two different film version of *Romeo and Juliet* you can vote on." He rustled in his briefcase, coming back with two

clear plastic video cases. “I’ve got the 1968 Zefferelli version, and then here’s the more recent MTV generation update...”

The class roared, all but Alice. Their choice was clear.

Mr. Blackmore smiled thinly.

“As much as I expected. Too bad for some of you lads, though...”

Blackmore stuffed one box back into his briefcase as he extracted the tape from the other.

“...the older one’s got some naughty bits this one lacks.”

A litany of moans filled the air, most of them distinctively male. Alice pursed her lips and looked back down at the dragon in her composition book. She was waiting for the compulsory crass remarks to come spilling out of the resident class clowns, Hershal and Brandon. But as the class quieted down, all Alice could hear was the squealing of the A/V cart’s wheels and Mr. Blackmore fumbling with the tape and VCR. It clacked into the machine and began to whirl. Alice looked back up just as Mr. Blackmore switched off the lights. The gray and white static on the television screen gave way to the flickering FBI warning.

A pair of whispers hissed across the room. Mr. Blackmore went, *Shhhh*.

Alice waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, eager to get a look at the room around her. The bright image of the studio logo on the screen helped.

Narrowing her eyes, she glanced over to the corner of the room where the worst kids in class usually holed up, tittering and cutting up.

They were not there.

Skipping, she thought. *They're going to be pissed when they find out they skipped a movie day.*

Shrugging and pushing the thought to the back of her mind, Alice returned her attention to the drawing on her desk. There was just enough light from the television and the window in the classroom door to work by. Ignoring the film she'd seen ten times already, she continued to flesh out the dragon's many scales.

The boys were nowhere to be seen at lunch, either. Usually Alice caught sight of them bumbling around the courtyard between the gymnasium and cafeteria, harassing some girls or surreptitiously drinking gin from plastic water bottles. Not today. That settled it; Hershal and Brandon had not come to school at all. Probably they were smoking dope in the woods behind Brandon's trailer park or wandering aimlessly around the outlet mall, looking for some trouble to get in.

Alice poked a limp, greasy French fry into her mouth and arched an eyebrow. Those boys were doomed.

Chapter Forty-Five

There was a lot of work to do after school was out, and Walt was beginning to feel the pressure. For one thing, he needed a chest freezer, one of those big deals folks sometimes kept in the garage for storing excess meat. He'd managed to dig the circulars out of the newspaper in the teacher's lounge, but his many chatty colleagues made it difficult to look it over. Accordingly, Walt brought the ads with him to his next class—where he also played a videotape in lieu of teaching—and pored over the deals while most of the kids slept, made out or zoned.

Hines' Electronics was advertising a sale on appliances that included a seven-cubic-foot freezer, which Walt circled in red ink. It was perfectly affordable, only two hundred dollars, but he doubted the freezer had enough space for his needs. The twenty-five cubic footer at Red's Discount Appliances looked far superior, but that one really jacked the cost on him. \$687.99. Walt puffed out his cheeks and ran a cost-benefit analysis in his head.

Hershal could not have weighed more than a hundred twenty pounds in his prime; that is, when he was still whole. Minus his entire skeleton and probably half of his internal organs—and additional water weight—the remaining bounty would probably amount to less than fifty pounds. His good buddy, the late Brandon Zuern, was a bit larger than the impish Hershal,

so Walt estimated somewhere in the neighborhood of sixty-five pounds of meat from him.

Beside the Red's Discount Appliances ad for the large chest freezer, Walt wrote: *115 lbs?*

Walt looked closer at the ad, studying the appliance's features. Lift-out baskets (that he would toss in the garbage), quick-freeze option (whatever *that* meant), audible and visual temperature alarm system and easy to read electronic controls. None of this helped Walt's left-brained mind make sense of the problem. The fact that Red's claimed the freezer could hold over eight hundred pounds of frozen food, however, helped immensely.

He grinned and tore the ad away from the circular. This was the one.

And with loads of space to fill up.

Walt could butcher four more their size and have room to spare.

In a way, it was a frightening thought. Five were dead already, thanks to Gwyn's sudden appearance in Walt's life. The creepy redneck who trailed his sister to his house was certainly no big loss, and the boys all but sealed their own fates. Amanda, on the other hand, was a painful death to experience. Still Walt thought of her often, sometimes for days on end, wondering if her horrible demise could have been prevented in some way. She should have stayed away, should have read the signs that the house was not safe. That Walt was not safe. He never really knew if he actually loved her when she was

alive and he was no more certain of that niggling question now that she was dead and gone.

Well, not quite gone. Her very slowly dissolving bones remained in the corpse pit behind the house. But at least he no longer had to see them, now that they were completely submerged beneath an ever-growing mound of quicklime.

Poor Amanda.

Still, Gwyn *had* to feed. It was every living organism's natural born right. Survival of the fittest and all that. Walt was not responsible for her existence, he only took it upon himself to sustain it. He neither knew from whence she came nor did he care. As long as she was happy, Walt's heart was at ease. And *that* was love.

There just wasn't any doubt about it: Walt loved Gwyn more dearly, more passionately and savagely, than he'd ever loved before. He would slaughter the whole damn town if she asked him to do it, no matter how repulsive he found the act of killing and stripping the flesh from a fellow human being's bones.

With that consideration lingering in his brain, he looked up at the dreary, dozing faces in front of him. Only about half of them paid any attention to the film. Others napped, fiddled with handheld electronics or passed notes between them. One of them, Rob Scaife, gazed at the ceiling with glassy eyes while he mindlessly scratched the omnipresent red spots on his forearm. Track marks. Walt had successfully ignored the obvious issue thus far—it was much more than his paltry salary

was worth to intercede on some loser junky's behalf—but he studied the prematurely balding boy more carefully now than ever.

After all, who would ever miss a junky?

Floating through the rest of her day in a haze, Alice was more than a little relieved when the last bell finally jangled at three o'clock. It was the weekend's herald, and although she had no particular plans Alice was glad to be getting away from the school grounds for a couple of days. So she packed her books up into her black denim book bag, slung it over her broad shoulder, and commenced the labyrinthine journey through the dim and dusty hallways that eventually led its captives to the brightly lit outside world. She crossed the front quad, rounded the rusty flagpole and walked through the teacher's parking lot on her way to her third-hand Subaru station wagon in the student lot.

Along the way, she caught a glimpse of Mr. Blackmore unlocking his hatchback. He stopped and began to stare at her. She only looked back at him for a fraction of a second before quickly whipping her head back to the sea of shitty used cars in front of her. But she knew he was still looking at her, following her with his watching gaze. It was all at once embarrassing at exhilarating; troubling and flattering.

When she finally reached her own car, she unlocked it and squeezed inside and brought her eyes back up to

the teacher's lot at the top of the slight hill. Mr. Blackmore's car was gone. Alice let out a quiet sigh and turned the key in the ignition.

And she wondered what she would have to do in order to warrant the same kind of invitation Hershall got the day before.

Frustrated that Red's could not perform a same-day delivery but relieved to have taken care of the freezer's purchase, Walt skipped up the porch steps to the front door. He had not forgotten the sheer magnitude of cleanup required inside, but even that was not pissing on Walt's parade. A little bleach, perhaps a little wax and some good old fashioned elbow grease, and he reckoned there would still be a few hours left in the evening for just him and Gwyn. It was only blood. They would dine together—he on braised pork chops and she on the usual, raw human meat. Then, after Walt washed the dishes and poured himself a nice glass of merlot, he'd let her guide him into the bedroom where they'd make love for hours.

Their often wild lovemaking sessions were at first somewhat awkward; she dealt with the jangling pain of her exposed nerve endings while he had a hard time getting accustomed to all the sticky fluids that seeped out of her from crown to toe. Later, when the scabs began to form, it was as if Walt began having sex with an entirely different person. Sticky became bone dry, slippery

turned scratchy and coarse. None of it quelled their heat, however. Not one night had passed since Gwyn first emerged from her prison in the ceiling that they had not furiously screwed. Even last night, after she was sated on the raw steaks Walt had sawed from Hershal's thighs, Gwyn threw herself at Walt; right there on the floor between steaming mounds of freshly butchered teenage boys.

She was insatiable in more ways than one.

Walt set his briefcase down on the floor, shut the door with his rump and slipped out of his shoes. He smiled at the recurring *déjà vu*.

"Honey, I'm *hooooome!*" he goofily called out.

There was no reply. The house was dead silent.

Walt said, "Huh."

He tiptoed around the yellowing swaths of blood that coated the foyer floor, leaping over the sticky mass that completely blocked ingress to the living room. The couch, he discovered, was unoccupied.

"Gwyn?"

Rounding the couch, Walt spotted several large sections of brown, flaky scabbing littering the living room and dining room floors. From the look of them, he decided they must have been ripped off rather than having fallen off naturally. Walt scowled and followed the scab trail with his eyes. They cut a path through the various stacks of books and boxes that filled the dining room and vanished around the dark corner.

The hallway.

Walt narrowed his eyes to slits and cautiously proceeded through the maze of cardboard and paper, emerging in the dark hall on the other end. Just as he anticipated, the attic stairs were down. From above, Walt heard the faint sound of wet, anguished sobbing.

Sarah!

His puzzlement rapidly metamorphosing into anger, Walt bared his teeth in a raging grimace as he raced up the attic steps.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no!

He hated himself for having to keep his sister up there; it was no way to live, and certainly no way to treat one's own flesh and blood. But Walt and Gwyn had an arrangement, a clear cut understanding that Sarah was off limits. Under no circumstances whatsoever was Gwyn to even go near the woman, much less feast on her. Occasionally Walt took it upon himself to bleed her a little bit, but it was nothing serious and definitely nothing that threatened her overall health.

But there could be no doubt that Gwyn was in the attic now—with Sarah. And not yet twenty-four hours after the frenzied killings of Hershal and Brandon, no less!

There is still meat from those two little shits, goddamn you! Walt's mind screamed.

Walt burst upward into a dusty shaft of orange afternoon sunlight. Beyond the perimeter of the light he could see nothing, but his sister's desperate sobs were loud and clear.

“Sarah?”

The good news was that she was obviously still alive. For how long, Walt did not know. He pushed out of the light and into the gray shadows of the attic. He got accustomed to the dimness in seconds and instantly found Sarah. She sat with her legs crossed on the mattress he'd given her, hunched over and shaking with each heaving sob. Walt quickly looked her over, checking her body and the bed for signs of bloodshed, evidence that Gwyn had finally given in to her bloodlust and attacked the one person she was not allowed to touch.

He saw nothing of the kind.

“Sarah, are you hurt?”

“Fuck off,” she mumbled.

“Are you hurt? Did she cut you? Bite you?”

Sarah's head jerked up. Her face was a shiny wet mound of swollen red skin. Her mouth was twisted down into a fierce scowl, her eyes squinty and leaking tears.

“I said FUCK OFF!” she roared. “FUCK OFF AND DIE!”

Walt's breath got caught in his chest. He was startled by her outburst and hurt by her bald-faced hatred for him. Didn't she understand he only did this to protect the women he loves, her and Gwyn both?

Clearly not. Walt frowned.

“I hardly think...,” he began, trailing off at the realization that he and his sister were not alone.

Across the attic, well out of the available light in the farthest corner away from them, something squished.

And slurped.

And groaned with pleasure.

“Gwyn,” Walt whispered.

“Go to it,” Sarah hissed in an eerily sing-song manner. “Go fuck your monster some more, you demented son of a bitch.”

He ignored the fuming insinuations his sister made and started to make his way over the crossbeams and past the insulated portion of the paneled flooring. Halfway across, Walt saw that Gwyn sat with her back to him, her shoulders jerking and her head slung low. Her back was a marbled pink, like a newborn rat. There were no scabs on it at all.

“What did you do?” Walt asked warily as he slowly drew near. “You’ve torn them all off...”

“Come here and I will show you.”

Walt stepped over onto another beam. He looked up from it and saw Gwyn jerk her arm quickly past her torso. She emitted a high-pitched cry and held up the five inch scab she’d just peeled away from her skin.

“Nearly done, now,” she purred.

Dancing over the last remaining beams that separated him from Gwyn, Walt closed in on the bent figure as she spun around to display an awful, ragged visage of torn and bloodied skin. Walt shouted out in fear, stumbling backward while Gwyn jutted her tongue through

Hershal's mouth and made low groaning sounds that reverberated throughout the attic.

She had separated the dead boy's face from his skull, and she'd done it roughly. The outer edges were tattered, as were the notched holes where once Hershal kept his eyes and lips. Now she pinched the loose pale skin between forefingers and thumbs and held it over her own face like a Halloween mask. Soon she was cackling hysterically.

Walt's heart jackhammered in his chest.

"Jesus Christ!" he screeched. He was in no way amused by the stunt.

Gwyn wiggled the skin mask over her face. The white, leathery flesh rippled. Red strings dangled from beneath it, dripping tiny droplets of crimson gore. She tittered.

Tee hee.

The horrific tableau did not much improve when at last she took the grisly face away to reveal her own. The skin on her face looked just like the skin on her back—irritated, pink and mottled, like scar tissue. All around her on the bare, broken paneling where once her veiny pod grew there were piles of crusty scabs. Walt made a face. She must have been up there for a while, peeling and tearing all those scabs from her entire body.

"Why?" he squeaked.

She let Hershal's face drop to the ground with a muted slap and ran one palm over the smooth crown of her tender, scraped head.

“It will be so much nicer this way, don’t you think?” A sweet smile spread across her face, pushing her round cheeks back. For the first time since the scabbing began, nothing chipped away and sprinkled down with the simple muscle movement. “I am becoming whole. I am becoming beautiful.”

“You are beautiful,” Walt shakily argued. “To me.”

Behind him, Sarah blubbered. Walt groaned and rolled his eyes.

Scooting a foot or so to one side, Gwyn revealed the faceless skull her body had been obscuring. Viscous globs of muscle and tendons and gristle clung tenaciously to the bone, drooling blood. The rest of the head retained its skin and Hershal’s distinctive shock of white-blond hair still spiked out on top. The eyes were missing, but Walt did not want to inquire after them. He shuddered at his own imagination as it was; Gwyn digging them out of the sockets with her fingernails, popping them between her teeth and sucking out the juices as though they were grapes...

He gagged and slapped a hand over his mouth. With an admonishing look and a motherly laugh, Gwyn dropped down to her hands and knees and crawled over to him. She thrust her face close to his and licked his trembling lips. Almost instinctively, they parted, allowing Gwyn’s tongue ingress to the warm interior of his mouth. Walt’s hands drifted up to her heavy breasts, smooth and dry for the first time. He groaned as his fingertips found the turgid nipples. She moaned girlishly

and fingered the buttons on his shirt, popping them open one by one.

Walt did nothing to resist her. He never did.

Across the attic, in the diminishing afternoon light, Sarah squalled.

The mechanism inside the portable CD player whined and ground the new Jesus and Mary Chain album to a halt. Alice snapped out of her reverie, startled by the abrupt silence. She glanced at the drawing on her bed beside her. She hadn't done anything new since she opened the composition book back up. All she'd done since she got home and barricaded herself in her room was listen to albums and let her mind freefloat.

For the most part, it floated toward Mr. Blackmore.

The way he'd stared at her in the parking lot after school confused and unnerved her. On the one hand, it was creepy as hell. Teachers were not supposed to behave like that, especially male teachers toward female students. He hadn't actually *done* anything, not really, but the look in his eyes told a story only the most gullible naïf would fail to recognize. There was wanting in those leering eyes. Lust, although not necessarily the sexual variety.

But probably.

Alice pulled the Jesus and Mary Chain CD out of the player, put it back in its proper case, and replaced it with her favorite Fugazi album. As the curt punk sounds

punched the air from the speakers, she shut the comp book and fell back against the mountain of pillows at the head of her bed. Any minute now her stepdad was due to start banging on the walls, bellowing at her to turn that goddamn noise off. She wanted to enjoy it as much as possible until then.

Fucking Harold.

She pushed him out of her mind. That allowed Mr. Blackmore to creep back in.

He wasn't so bad, not even for a teacher. To most of the kids, he was just one step shy of freakishly weird, but that only served to endear him all the more to Alice. What made him weird to her peers—his passion for old books, the casual way he dressed and the sleepy, almost hypnotized look he usually wore on his bedraggled face—painted the picture of an interesting, even attractive person to her. Still, his role in her life acted as a barrier between them, something not even a perfectly normal friendship could pass through. He was the superior, she the inferior. He taught, she learned, and then they went in their wholly separate directions when that was done for the day.

Anything else, anything *more*, was strictly forbidden.

Maybe that look indicated a disagreement with the rules, though. Maybe Mr. Blackmore saw something in Alice that no one else did, not even Harold. *Maybe* he could see the nascent spark of her burgeoning brilliance, hidden deep in her breast from anyone who did not care

to give her a more detailed analysis. Or even a second look.

Alice made up her mind. She was going to pay more attention to Mr. Blackmore paying more attention to her. See what comes of it. In all likelihood, it would be nothing at all. But still...

She closed her eyes, laced her fingers over her paunchy stomach and smiled with satisfaction.

Her sweet, comfortable mind trip was cut short by the rapid pounding on the wall just behind her. Startled, Alice jerked up to a sitting position.

"Turn that shit OFF!" Harold yelled from the dingy bedroom on the other side of the wall.

Alice reached over and switched the portable CD player off. Silence once again flooded her head. The inundation of quiet drowned out all thoughts of Mr. Blackmore, leaving only emptiness and loneliness and a queer, unfathomable fear.

What do I have to be afraid of? Alice vaguely wondered.

The answer was there before she finished asking herself.

Everything.

Chapter Forty-Six

It was Thursday when the freezer arrived in an unmarked white delivery van. The driver and his assistant hauled into the house, set it up in the kitchen and gave its new owner a very brief tutorial on its most basic functions. Walt signed for it and tipped the driver an extra twenty for the long drive. It was only the work of a moment to get the freezer a third filled up with what was left of the two rowdy boys who had come to Walt's house earlier in the week. To any uniformed observer who might take a peek, it would appear to be nothing more but a ridiculous quantity of frozen meat.

Which, essentially, it was.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Friday was a snow day.

The air warmed slightly in the night, allowing the perfect conditions for the flakes to start falling. By sunrise, the ground was covered in a blinding white blanket of snow.

Walt grimaced when he saw it through his bedroom window. He wondered what it meant for the pit.

Alice giggled when she realized that the brilliant light blasting the sheer curtains of her window was due to snow. She wasted no time flinging herself at the CD player beside her bed and switching it to the AM band. The speaker on the first clear station she found droned on about the state of the economy, the president's lack of moral fortitude, and the invisible connection that lied therein.

"Come on, damnit..."

The next station played dozy Samba music.

"Come on." She kept searching.

Finally, at the end of the band, Alice hit upon a news station that promised to repeat a list of school closures momentarily.

And, when they did, hers was among those closed for the day due to inclement weather.

"YES!" she cried with glee.

“Shut the fuck up in there!” her stepfather, Harold, bellowed from the next room. *“Try’na fuckin’ sleep in here!”*

Alice’s heart thrummed. Her joy rapidly melted into a lukewarm puddle of disenchantment.

School would have been better than this. Maybe Hershal and Brandon would still be skipping and leave her alone. Hell, maybe they were dead. That would be something.

Most of all, she would have been afforded the opportunity to see Mr. Blackmore afresh in the new light of his leering, lusty gaze in the parking lot the day before. Now Alice would not see him again until Monday, three days away.

It might as well have been three weeks.

Or three months.

Alice sighed. A tear squeezed out of the corner of one eye. Wiping it away, she wondered what ever happened to her winter snow boots. It was going to be a long, wet walk to the bus stop.

The morning light shaft she’d grown so accustomed to was grayish and foreboding. When she actually slept, Sarah always woke up just to see the light leaking through the cracks above her. There was nothing else to look forward to. Not anymore. But this one, infinitesimal thing was just barely enough to give her a shred of hope. The mere fact that there was anything

even remotely enjoyable left to her kept total despair at bay.

Today, however, it was colorless and dull. The freezing cold breeze swept the snow into the attic. Gradually it built up into a clear-white bank on the beams beneath the air vent slats, accumulating only a little more quickly than it melted.

Sarah could not help but wonder if she would live to see another warm day. Or, if she did, whether or not she would still be chained up in her lunatic brother's attic. Whichever the case, freedom seemed remote to her mind. A wild fantasy, on par with the sort of unicorns-and-rainbows daydreams she entertained as a girl. She would walk away from this charnel house around the same time winged kittens swarmed the sky and blotted out the sun.

Wrapping her bare arms around herself, Sarah shivered. Although she recognized that being this cold was far better than sharing the attic with that horrendous monster Walt called *Gwyn*, she still considered the possibility of asking after warmer clothes. He'd brought her the mattress. A damn jacket shouldn't be such a big deal.

Until that eventuality, she rose to her feet and began to move and stretch. She bent at the waist, touched her toes, and twisted back and forth. It kept her loose and warmed the blood in her veins. In lieu of something to read or a television, it was also just about the only thing she *could* do. So on she went, craning her neck from

side to side, stretching her triceps and shoulders and waist.

When she decided to move on to her middle back and twisted her torso as far as the muscles would allow, Sarah screamed. She lost her balance and crashed down to the mattress.

She had forgotten all about the mutilated head that thing left up there. It still sat there, resting on its side. Its dark, empty sockets weirdly stared at her. A few inches of severed spinal cord jutted from its butchered, severed neck. The face—the one Gwyn had pried away from the skull and worn like a mask—was gone. Sarah swallowed hard at the thought that the creature probably ate it.

Maneuvering herself on the mattress until the weak winter light was on her face, Sarah closed her eyes and tried to think of something else. She thought of Mitch, but he never made her feel any better even when she was at home and in no danger of being killed and eaten by a creature that could not possibly exist. She thought of her house, but at this point she really could not care less if she ever saw it again. All she wanted was to live. That, and to get as far away from there as possible.

So instead Sarah squeezed her eyes tightly shut and thought about killing Walt. The monster, too. Prying their throats apart with a serrated bread knife and chortling at them as their lives spurted out of their necks.

Ha, ha, ha.

Sarah continued along these lines for a while, slaughtering her brother and his beast over and over again in her mind in a multitude of increasingly grisly ways. Eventually, she permitted the bloody reverie to lull her to sleep. And in her dreams, Sarah killed them some more.

Nora lit another cigarette and glanced at the digital clock on the nightstand. Not long ago, this would have been about the time she'd be getting ready to open the store. She would be shuffling hangers in the closet, looking for the best top to compliment whatever skirt or slacks she'd already chosen. More often than not, she'd also find herself mindlessly whistling whichever song had been playing in her head when she woke up. Something 80s, most likely. Brit pop type stuff. *I'll stop the world and melt with you...*

Hmm, hmm, hmm hmmm.

Not today. Today she remained in bed, the sheets bunched up at her feet despite the nasty cold weather. Her cigarette slowly burned to ash; she only took occasional drags from it. When an inch of gray ash broke away and burst into a dark smudge on the top sheet, she ignored it. The smudge was surrounded by small, circular burn holes, anyway.

Nora stabbed the smoke out in the moldy coffee cup beside the clock—*IN THE READS: GET YOUR READ ON!*—and lay back down on the dirty bed. She had not

bothered to wash the sheets for months, and she didn't care. She didn't care about the sheets, or the dishes, or the pile of mail gathering beneath the mail slot in her front door. Nora doubted she could muster much concern if the place caught fire. She'd probably just lay there and burn.

She had done everything she could. She did not blame herself for any of that. There were interviews with the police, long nights combing the few criss-crossing streets that constituted "downtown," and even the hundred and fifty photocopied *Have You Seen Me?* posters she stapled to practically every sky-reaching signpost and utility pole in town. Nora broke into Amanda's place, spent the night and drenched her missing friend's pillowcases with her tears. She spent hours at a time on the horn with Amanda's widowed mom, a woman she'd never met face-to-face but in whom she now found a close ally against the forces of desperation and despair. Nora even wasted weeks trying like hell to track down Amanda's weird, elusive boyfriend, the ever-mysterious Walt.

There could not have been another woman in the world with a friend as close as Amanda who had a two-year relationship going with a man the woman had never seen. Only Nora. There were times when Nora was ninety-nine percent certain that Walt did not actually exist, that he was either a psychotic delusion or the subject of an elaborate joke that never reached its punchline. But Amanda was neither crazy nor cruel, so

neither rang true enough to seriously consider. She said the man was just shockingly insular and insecure about meeting new people, especially women. It wasn't just Nora, but practically every other soul in Amanda's life, as well. It was one of the sundry eccentricities old Walt displayed that endeared him to her. He was crazy, but good crazy. Unique.

Nora thought maybe he was deformed or something. Then Amanda pinned a photo of them, of her and her beau, on the bulletin board in the shop's office. Walt was not deformed at all. In fact, he was peculiarly handsome. Sort of roguish in the way his brow angled down to the bridge of his nose, even though he was grinning from ear to ear.

Cameras don't record images of hoaxes and illusions. Walt was real. Just exceptionally strange. Strange enough to have done something awful to Amanda, perhaps? Nora had to know.

The trouble was that there were twenty-three Walts and Walters in the telephone directory, and countless more W.s. That was not particularly surprising. What was surprising was the total absence of anything that contained the intangible man's full name in Amanda's apartment. To Nora, that seemed impossible. How could a woman date a guy for three whole years and not have a single letter, sticky note or receipt with his name on it?

What was the fucking deal with this guy?

Giving up was the last thing Nora wanted to do, but she'd hit a brick wall. That was back in November. Ever

since she had been laying around, sucking down cigarettes and subsisting on Chinese delivery and canned beer. She locked up the shop at closing time two and half weeks earlier and never went back. Without Amanda, there wasn't any point in it.

Nora dozed for an hour or so more before finally summoning the strength and courage to rise from the bed. She made a quick survey of her surroundings, all of it dingy and dirty and cluttered beyond belief.

By her estimation it had been more than two weeks since she last left the apartment. How long before one is officially classified as a shut-in?

With a curled upper lip and a grunting sigh, Nora threw on some dirty clothes and went hunting for her car keys.

Outside it has stopped snowing. The treetops are crowned with white crests and the field beyond the backyard is smooth and serene. She is reminded of long ago mornings when the house had an iron stove and she huddled close by, eager to absorb its warmth. Agnes was still in the house, but still sleeping. Papa was gone to town and might not come back around for days. Peaceful. Warm by the stove. She touched it and it was more than warm, burning white hot. Her fingertips screamed pain at her and later on they bubbled up into smarting blisters. She wouldn't show them to Agnes. She bore the pain and tended to her own problems. Like

always. She looks at her fingertips now. No blisters. No prints, either. Just light pink skin, webbed through with blue and purple. Blood coursing through. But not enough.

Naked she rises from the bed, joyous that she no longer leaves imprints of blood nor drops scabs like dead leaves from an autumn tree. She pads across the kitchen, the tiles cool on her soles, her hands cupping her breasts to keep them warm. The icebox is curious, not like Mama's old wood cabinet for milk and butter and those broths she made of chicken bones and hog neck. This one hums and opens from the top like a coffin. The frigid air from inside spills out and turns to white mist in the warmer climate of the kitchen. Beneath the mist is her quarry, her food. Her meat. Her warm hands release her breasts and sink down into the cold, probing among the rock hard slabs. She will not bother to cook it, only warm it up until it is soft enough to chew and the blood seeps out. Licking her lips, she seizes one from the top and lets the top slam down on the icebox.

Somewhere outside a bird cries. She thinks it sounds like a hawk. Looking for its next sumptuous meal. Soon, she thinks, I will too.

She slaps the strip on a cast iron skillet and turns the knob that makes the flame ignite. She thinks that is something she must have done before, but she cannot recall. Heavy and black where use has not turned it permanently brown. It is hard to lift for a little girl, hard to swing like a tennis racket but the momentum carries it

straight into Papa's skull. She frowns and shakes the distant memory away. The frosted meat on the skillet is turning too brown for her liking. When the exterior starts to sizzle and the juices spit out on the pan, she yanks it away from the flame. She does not want to lose the blood.

The meat is devoured quickly, leaving a still frozen pit in the center. She leaves that in the sink. Her face is dripping red and pink. She sticks out her tongue, licks a cheek and tastes the coppery juice there. Was it the tiny, pale one or the larger one with the permanent scowl on his ruddy face? No way to know. But it does not much matter. In the end, all are meat.

The boys are meat. The women are meat. The one in the attic, she is meat, too. Even Walt is little more than bones and skin and meat.

She bends at the knees until her bare rump touches the cold kitchen floor. She is gazing at the icebox, wondering why she is still so hungry and how long the meat is going to last. Not long. Never long.

What then?

Jerking her shoulders and kicking against the floor, she leaps back up and storms back to the icebox. Through the window above it, she sees the hawk. Brown feathers contrast sharply against the white world around it. It is sinking its sharp, hooked bill into a field mouse, tearing the animal open to get at the succulent morsels inside.

Her mouth fills up with saliva. Swallowing it with a loud gulp, she delves back into the meatbox. The bloodbox. But all she finds are more cold bricks. Even warmed on the stove they are not so good. Not the same. She frowns and bares her teeth and slams the icebox shut.

Fresh meat upstairs, she remembers. Fresh and hot and raw.

Walt says no.

But she is not so certain that she needs Walt anymore.

Her feet slap the linoleum in a rapid staccato rhythm. She seizes the cord dangling from the hallway ceiling and she pulls hard. Up there, it sucks in with a frightened gasp. A hungry grin stretches across her flushed pink face.

Fresh and hot and raw and afraid.

She licks her lips and ascends the steps into the attic.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Despite the relative safety of her boots, Alice treaded warily through the wet snow, careful not to step off into the ditch where all the muddy slush accumulated. The boots only reached mid-calf, and the cold, filthy morass below would undoubtedly splash up and into them. Years ago, when Alice was little, her mother would collect the plastic bags the newspaper came in throughout the year. Then, when it snowed it wintertime, she'd wrap Alice's little feet in the bags and secure them at the knees with rubber bands. She never got slushed that way. Didn't have to take a hot bath before coming back into the house for grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup, if she did not want to.

Howard did not know how to make grilled cheese and tomato soup. Even if he did, he wouldn't. Alice was left to fend for herself. But it had been that way for almost half her life now. Gradually, she was getting used to it.

Beneath her feet the snow crunched in some places and squished in others. Grackles screeched above her, cawing at one another among the bare treetops. As a kid she would have deemed the landscape around her a winter wonderland. Now it just looked dreary and dead and utterly hopeless. As if spring would never come again.

She trudged on. Eventually she reached the corner where the gravel road on which she lived ended. It

formed a T with the oily macadam street that met Highway 5 at the bottom of the hill. At that intersection was the bus stop, although no one would know to look at it. There was no bench or sign or covering from the threat of rain and sleet. Just another muddy street corner. When Alice got there, she breathed a cloud of warm steam on her ruddy hands and waited.

She waited for the better part of an hour without ever seeing proof of life on Earth apart from herself, a few scattered birds and a mongrel dog snuffling in the woods on the other side of the road. She popped her comp book out of her book bag and got to sketching on the page facing the dragon. In just twenty minutes of drawing while standing in the cold, she had the beginnings of a recognizable portrait. Alice pouted at it. Then she scrawled a quotation beneath the floating head—

Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears

For they are the rain upon the blinding dust of earth
—and returned the comp book to her bag.

She did not know the bus schedule, but she was surprised one had not come along by then. Hunching her shoulders and rubbing her hands together, she considered her options. She could go back home, spend the day getting hounded by Howard, but she would rather stand in the cold all day than that. Otherwise, she could wait some more in hope that a bus might come along, or keep walking in the general direction of town.

With a grimace and a jerking shiver, Alice set off down the shoulder of Highway 5.

With no particular destination in mind, Nora just drove. The weather had all but swept the streets clear of competing traffic, affording her a leisurely path to wherever she wanted to go. At first she just wound around the outskirts of town, paying more attention to the classic rock station on her radio than the road in front of her. Before she knew it, her internal autopilot had taken her away from town, speeding west down the interstate. She snapped back to reality then, keeping an eye out for the next exit. She didn't want to end up across the state line and then have to drive all the way back home.

Nora pulled off onto the exit for Highway 5. She knew she could take its winding trajectory back to town; it only took three times longer than the interstate. But it was scenic, she supposed, although more so in the full bloom of late spring than now, when the forest hunched dead and low beneath the crushing weight of winter.

The world grew darker the instant she was engulfed by the wooded road. She slowed to accommodate the cracked macadam in its state of neglected disrepair. Occasionally she glanced around the interior of the car, looking for color to counteract the outside palate of gray and black. This was a dead time, and with no one else in sight—either on the road or anywhere near it—Nora felt

like the last woman on a doomed planet. Hence the bright red scarf coiled up on the passenger seat was a warm and welcome sight. At one point, she even smiled at it as though it was an old friend or a treasured child. It was then that the tires screeched and Nora's car went into a spin.

Her breath froze in her windpipe and the spin on the ice patch seemed like it was occurring in slow motion. She simply stared forward, through the windshield at the southbound road, the trees, the northbound road, and the trees on the other side. Over and over again, until at last she skidded off Highway 5 and the car slumped into a muddy ditch. The halt was abrupt and Nora pitched forward, saved from bashing her face against the steering wheel by her seatbelt. When her head stopped trying to spin in time with the car, she let out the breath and muttered, "Shit."

Alice heard the squeal, a rush of air and the dull *whumph* that eclipsed into silence. It began and ended in the span of a few seconds. She stopped walking, narrowed her eyes and peered down the hazy road. But she couldn't see anything. The sound must have been deceptive, sounding closer than it actually was. Probably it carried down the corridor that cut through the dense forest, like a gunshot. She continued on.

Around the bend and further down the slope of the road, Alice finally saw the steam sputtering out of the

car's exhaust pipe. Most of the car itself was shrouded in the snow bank it crashed into. Alice knew from experience that the bank concealed a deep reservoir of muddy slush. She vaguely wondered if the driver was still in the car, and whether or not they were all right.

As she drew nearer, the passenger side door cracked open a few inches, lingered there, and then slammed shut. A minute later, it cracked open again, only this time someone started to work their way out from inside the car. It was a woman. She looked frazzled, but otherwise uninjured. Alice maintained her languid pace and arrived in front of the car in the amount of time it took the woman to stumble back onto the road.

"Hey, are you all right?"

Puzzled, Nora spun around to identify the source of the voice. She moved too quickly. Disoriented by the accident and the blurry gray haze that enveloped her, she lost her footing on the slick road and fell crashing on her rump. Heavy footsteps clopped wetly toward her and before she knew what was going on, someone was helping her back up to her feet.

She was just a kid, maybe fourteen or fifteen years old. Her pudgy face was expressionless but kind, her ruddy complexion framed by a jet black bob that curled in toward her round chin.

She said, "You got a concussion or anything?" Nora just stared. "Lady? Do you need an ambulance?"

She felt idiotic the moment she heard the words come out her mouth. How the hell was she going to get an ambulance out there? The car looked pretty well screwed and it wasn't as if Alice had a magic phone in her pocket. But if the lady *did* need medical help, *something* was going to have to be done.

Eventually, the woman's eyes cleared and she looked down at Alice.

"No," she said weakly. "No, I think I'm fine. Just a little...shaken."

"Nothing broken?"

"No, I don't think so."

The woman released herself from Alice's steadying hold and shuffled forward a few steps. She appeared to be testing herself out, making sure everything was working the way it was supposed to work. Apparently satisfied, she turned back toward Alice and smiled thinly.

"Yeah, I think I'm okay. Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Alice said genuinely.

For a moment thereafter, the two of them stood in the middle of Highway 5, puffing intermittent clouds of steam from their mouths and not saying a word. Once or twice a bird cried somewhere in the middle distance, but apart from that the world was quiet and still. Finally, Alice spoke up.

“Suppose we should try to get your car out of that ditch?”

Nora smiled and nodded.

It was hard work, wet and cold and sweaty. Alice pushed from the ditch, the slush rising almost to the tops of her boots, while the woman—who introduced herself as Nora—pushed from the passenger side. They were eventually successful, steering the car back up onto the road. It even started up with no problems.

“Thank god!” Nora exclaimed upon hearing and feeling the roar of the engine coming to life.

Even Alice grinned and laughed. She stood nothing to gain from a stranger’s good fortune, but having been integral to the process made her feel warm and good.

“The least I can do,” Nora said to her, “is offer you a ride.”

Alice stared off in the distance, down the road she’d planned to keep walking down until a reason to stop surfaced in her mind.

“Not really going anyplace,” she mumbled.

“Yeah? Me, neither.”

They looked at one another’s faces. They both found sadness there.

Alice climbed into Nora’s car.

They chatted idly but amiably.

After a short while, Alice grew comfortable enough to slide her cold feet out of her boots and prop them up

on the dash. She then extracted her composition book, opened it up to her last work-in-progress, and got to sketching while she and Nora chatted about the weather and the town and the futility of it all.

“Who’s that?” Nora asked, pointing at the developing portrait on the open page.

Alice flushed even pinker than before.

“Him? He’s...well, fuck it. He’s my English teacher.”

Nora chuckled.

“Oh? Well, I’ll be.”

“Mr. Blackmore. He’s kind of weird.”

“Handsome, though.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“You guess? You’re the one drawing him. Pretty damn good, too.”

“Thanks.”

Nora fiddled with the heater, adjusting the knob to make it blast a little hotter.

“What’s all that underneath?” she asked.

“What, this? Just a quote.”

“What’s it say? Can’t read it while I’m driving.”

“Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears...for they are the rain upon the blinding dust of earth. It’s from Great Expectations.”

“You don’t say.”

“We read it in his class. Everybody hated it, and I mean *everybody*.”

“But not you.”

“Nope. Not me.”

“That’s cool. I like people who read. Not so much those who don’t. I used to own a bookstore...”

“Oh yeah?”

“Well, I still do, technically. It’s just, well...it’s more or less in limbo right now, I suppose.”

“That’s too bad,” Alice said, keeping her eyes on the page.

“Can’t say we see a lot of sales by way of Mr. Dickens, but...”

Nora suddenly gasped, her eyes wide and glossy.

“Holy fucking shit!” she cried.

Alice jumped, looking at Nora and the road in front of them, trying to determine the cause of the woman’s sudden exclamation.

“What is it?”

“Fucking *Dickens!*!”

Oh no, Alice thought. She’s nuts. I’ve gotten into a car with a complete goddamn stranger and she’s a crazy loon. What the hell was I thinking?

Nora began to breathe more loudly, harshly. She then turned her bulging eyes on Alice, who slightly cringed at the wild expression.

“You mind if we run a little errand?” Nora asked expectantly.

“I...I...I guess not,” Alice weakly stammered.

* * *

Nora would never have guessed in a million years that Charles Dickens and a fourteen year old kid would give her the key to get to the bottom of this mess.

Yet there it was.

Martin Chuzzlewit, she repeated over and over again in her mind. *Special friggin' order.*

I've got you, Walt.

Chapter Forty-Nine

The book was right where she'd left it, on the cluttered old oak desk in the back office. A sheet of paper, folded in half, was wrapped around it with a rubber band. Nora seized the paperback text as soon as she burst through the office door and tore the rubber band off. In a frenzy, she unfolded the paper so quickly it tore. Quickly, she read the receipt's pertinent contents.

IN THE READS

7856 Front Street, Suite C

ORDER FORM SUMMARY

Dickens, Charles. *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Penguin Classics.

FOR Blackmore, Walter

\$6.99 + tax PAID IN FULL

Nora stuffed the receipt in her front pants pocket like it was a soiled tissue and stretched across the desk for the newest telephone directory.

"Walter Blackmore," she growled as she began flipping through the thin, yellow pages.

From the doorway, a puzzled Alice asked, "You *know* him?"

Nora paused in her frantic page-turning and turned to look at the confused girl. Alice's hands were stuffed in her pockets and her head was cocked to one side. She raised her eyebrows.

“Mr. Blackmore,” Nora whispered.

Chapter Fifty

Walt stood at the end of a long and narrow hallway. There were no windows and no doors. There were no lights, either, but somehow the hallway was dimly lit. Enough to see clear down to the other end, at any rate.

Walls, floor and ceiling were constructed of freshly cut pine. Walt could smell it. It was like sticky sweet smelling needles on the forest floor in summertime. When he took a step forward, the planks comprising the floor creaked and groaned. Light spilled up from the cracks beneath and melted away when he stepped off the plank. He screwed up his face and shoved his lower lip out. He could not remember where he was or how he got there. Judging from the structure of the place, he would have been boarded up in there. There was no way out, so there could not have been any other way in.

It was not a hallway at all. It was more like a coffin.

Walt crept forward as the light began to die out, leaving the space shrouded in increasingly darkening shadows. Each time the planks creaked and buckled beneath his weight, the ceiling planks mirrored them. Clumps and clods of dirt rained down from above. Walt gasped. He was being buried.

He opened his mouth to scream, but it was instantly filled with earth. He could taste the musty dirt, feel the worms and insects burrowing out of it and slithering down his throat. Walt clutched at his neck and jerked

his head forward, but the dirt only packed more deeply in.

The giant coffin shook. The light was almost completely gone now. From the darkness at the far end a figure emerged. It was Walt's sister. It was Sarah. She looked incredibly sad, like something dreadful had happened.

She had no skin.

"WAAAAAAAAAAAAALT!" she shrieked.

Odd, Walt thought. She didn't even open her mouth.

"WALT! WAAAAALT! HELP MEEEEEE!"

The light snuffed out. So did the air.

Walt snapped awake gasping for air.

"WAAAAAALT!"

He blinked rapidly and sat upright, not entirely certain if he was still dreaming or not. When he heard Sarah squeal and cry he decided he was awake. It came from the attic, not his head. And Gwyn was not in bed.

"Oh, hell."

She was not blacking out, but Sarah's mind was in the process of switching off. It was instinctual; her psyche was simply protecting her from the horror that had come upon her.

Like Walt, she too had been dreaming. In her fantasy, contrarily, Sarah maintained total control. She was free of her shackle and armed with the two sharpest and longest knives ever made. When she sliced into

Walt and his beast, they came apart like overcooked meat. Wet slivers of them sloughed off with each swipe of the blades and slapped the gore-soaked floor below. Never before had Sarah entertained anything so gruesome, much less enjoyed it. She could not even stomach the most innocuous horror film. But this was catharsis. This was her new and only dream.

The last image in her mind's eye before she was startled awake was the monster's terrified face. The first thing she saw after the dream faded away was its awful grin and leering, hungry eyes. That was the first time Sarah screamed.

Naked as always, it loomed over her on the mattress, smiling like a hyena and licking its lips. The last time Sarah had seen the thing, it was mostly covered in scabs. Now it was pink and veiny. Its heavy breasts swung pendulously as it crawled over Sarah, snapping at her with its teeth and clawing at her tattered clothes and skin. She cried out, alternately screaming her brother's name and whimpering from the repulsive terror of it all.

It chuckled and hissed before sticking out its dripping tongue and licking Sarah's lips. She clamped them tightly together and tried to jerk her head away, but the creature dug its fingers into her hair and forced it back.

"Lovely," it rasped. "Lovely girl."

"Don't," Sarah murmured.

"Lovely and divine. *Scrumptious.*"

"Please."

Its face plunged at her and the thing pressed its lips to hers in a hard kiss. It moaned with pleasure as it forced its tongue into her mouth. Sarah struggled but she could not overpower the creature. Her eyes squirted tears, blurring her vision. Then the thing seized the front of Sarah's blouse and with a single deft jerk tore it open. Her bra went next. Sarah's breasts jumped free and slumped down on either side of her chest. The monster clawed at them, digging furrows in Sarah's skin with its sharp fingernails. Sarah gasped in pain and screamed again.

"WAAAAAALT!?"

She expected no assistance from the sociopath who locked her up in the first place, but it was Walt's law that his pet demon leave her be. If there was any consistency in his madness then the fact that the beast was upon her now would upset the bastard. Yet despite the immense racket the struggle created, there were no indications that he was coming to her rescue. In all likelihood, he'd abandoned her to this fate. Whatever was left of his humanity, the revolting monster on top of her had destroyed it.

Despair sank into her brain. No one was ever going to save her. Sarah was completely on her own. She let out a wet sob.

And then she thrust her hands up and clutched the creature's head. Fine, tiny hairs had sprouted from its scalp, too blonde to see in the dark attic. Sarah pressed hard on the temples and the thing grunted. She pressed

harder yet and it shrieked. It relinquished its hold on her and seized her wrists. Sarah shot up and drove a knee into its stomach. It groaned pitifully and bore its teeth.

“Get off!” Sarah growled. She kneed it again and then jammed the crown of her head into its throat. The humanoid thing wheezed and rolled off of Sarah and off the mattress. It gurgled and gaped.

Sarah scurried away from it, off the soiled mattress and up to her feet. The steel line that secured her to the post went taut. There was only so far she could go.

The creature was already recovering.

It was now on its hands and knees, spitting blood on the insulation. It snapped its face toward Sarah and snarled. Its teeth were stained red. Its eyes gleamed with rage.

Sarah trembled.

The monster sprang at her, screaming and opening its maw wide.

Alice switched the radio on, but Nora immediately reached over and turned it back off again.

“I need to explain,” she told the sullen girl.

“I just want to listen to some music,” Alice griped. “And you should take me back home now, too.”

“I will, I’ll do that. But this is an emergency. Really. My best friend is missing, maybe dead. I don’t know. I’ve been trying to figure out who this weird sack of shit

is for *months*, and I swear god himself must have sent you my way because now I've got him. I've finally got him!"

Nora's babbling did little to assuage Alice's apprehension of her. The more she tried to explain herself, the crazier she sounded. Alice just wanted to get away from her, almost enough to jump out of the car while it was still moving. Maybe at the next stop sign or red light...

"Look, the thing of it is this is my last chance. My last lead, if you like. I've tried everything else and everybody else. Maybe this Blackmore guy is as innocent as the driven snow, but there's a chance he's not. I've got to find out, Alice."

"He's just a nerd!" Alice protested. "I mean, he's a high school English teacher! How many guys you ever met get their jollies off friggin' Shakespeare, and then go home and kidnap or kill some chick?"

"I might be about to meet one."

"I don't think so, lady. Not Mr. Blackmore. He's hardly going to snatch somebody everyone would miss and..." Alice trailed off with an audible pop of her lips. Nora took notice of the young girl's unsettled expression from the corner of her eye. Something was amiss.

The boys. The troublemakers. The supposed skippers, Hershal and Brandon. Hershal had gone to see him, after school. At his *house*. He never came back...

Alice frowned and shook her head. This was bullshit. Mr. Blackmore didn't kill the nasty little jerk, he just ran

off someplace to smoke grass with his chucklehead buddy rather than come to school on Thursday. Hell, they did that all the time. There was absolutely nothing to it worth giving a second thought. No matter how strange it was for a teacher to insist one of his students come to his home at night.

“Alice? What is it?”

“What’s *what*? It’s nothing. This is crazy, Nora.”

“What’s crazy is a close friend’s boyfriend you’ve never laid eyes on. What’s up with this guy? What’s he hiding?”

“Nothing” Alice shouted. “He’s not hiding anything! You’re paranoid!”

Nora winced at the outburst. Adolescent girls were prone to them—she remembered her own unstable teenage years all too well—but Alice’s blind, too amorous defense of the man seemed peculiar all the same.

“Alice,” Nora began gently, “how much do you *really* know about the guy? He’s got his teacher hat on at school, but he’s not like that all the time. Not at home, or when he’s just out with friends. Teachers are people, too. And sometimes people are really, terribly messed up.”

Alice scowled.

“*I’m* the one between us who actually knows him,” she said in a low voice. “Let’s not forget that.”

Nora sighed. The kid was getting to her. Nora did not remember ever having had a crush on a teacher

herself at that age—they were all women or trolls to her memory—but even so, she found it difficult to comprehend the bizarre lengths to which Alice was willing to go in a grown man’s defense. It begged the question: what had Walt Blackmore done to her? *With* her? Was he a pederast on top of kidnapper and murderer?

But no, she did not know that for a fact. Any of it. That was why she was driving somewhat recklessly toward a complete stranger’s far-flung country house.

“I guess we’ll just have to find out,” Nora responded at length.

“*We?*” Alice blurted. “What do you mean, we? You’re taking me home, right?”

“I hate to break this to you, kid, but I’m going to need you for this.”

Alice blanched.

“Fuck that!” she cried. “I’m not helping you get all up in Mr. Blackmore’s face about this whacked out crap! He’s...he’s my friend.”

“He’s your *teacher*.”

“He’s not like other teachers,” Alice pouted. “He...sees me.”

Nora pursed her lips but refrained from saying anything. Kids were so predictable; it was no wonder they tended to be such easy targets for predators. Predators like Walt Blackmore.

After a stretch of strained silence, Nora said, “Look—maybe I *am* wrong about this. Hell, I haven’t got a shred

of evidence against the guy. Otherwise I'd just let the cops deal with it, wouldn't I? All I want to do is talk to him, ask him a couple of questions. If nothing's fishy, fine. If something seems off, we book and I *will* call the police. Either way, I'm not planning on *getting all up in his face* or making any kind of scene. I just think it'll help smooth things out if you're there with me. A common acquaintance, you know?"

"What if she's there?" Alice asked nonchalantly.

"Who?"

"Your friend. Mr. Blackmore's *girlfriend*."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

Alice sniffed. "Probably just dumped her ass," she said.

Nora surreptitiously rolled her eyes. She drove on, ignoring the speed limit entirely, and neither she nor Alice said another word until Walt's house came into view.

Chapter Fifty-One

Sarah crab-walked to the support beam, leaving as much slack on the cable as possible. Gwyn launched herself into the air like a pouncing panther, her fingers curled like claws, her mouth open and snarling. Gathering the cable in her hands, Sarah held it up and drove it into Gwyn's neck when the monstrous woman fell upon her. The cable smashed against Gwyn's throat. The momentum made the impact hard; her neck burned red in a deep furrow all the way across. Gwyn soughed awfully and dropped to her side.

"Kuuuuh," Gwyn moaned.

"Yeah, whatever," Sarah growled as she scrambled to her feet and delivered a solid kick to the monster's ribs. Gwyn grunted and flashed a furious gaze at Sarah.

"Kuh-kuh-KILL YOU!"

"I very much doubt it."

Sarah seized Gwyn by the neck and dragged her closer. Gwyn burbled and grumbled, her breath strained. Sarah then made a tight fist and punched Gwyn directly in the trachea. She could feel the airway crumple like paper against her knuckles. Gwyn spit blood and wheezed. Sarah punched her again.

"What was that?" Sarah shouted. "You were going to kill me? Is that fucking right?"

Sarah rose to her feet again and recommenced kicking the struggling creature at her feet, again and again. Her foot crashed against bone and cartilage,

collapsing ribs and obliterating Gwyn's nose. After a while, Gwyn stopped moving at all. As far as Sarah could tell, she was not even breathing.

Feet pounded against the steps leading up to the attic, but Sarah ignored it. As Walt surfaced from the opening, Sarah drove her heel into Gwyn's temple. She heard a dull, damp thud and then did it again. This time she felt the skull give a little. The third attempt made a shallow crater in the side of Gwyn's head.

Sarah laughed triumphantly.

"No!" Walt cried as he scrambled toward them. "Sarah, no! What have you done?"

"Not much. I just killed your fucking monster, that's all."

"Killed? Oh god! Gwyn!"

His face twisted with sorrow, Walt dropped to Gwyn's side and pulled her limp, bloody body into his arms. Tear spilled down his cheeks and he peppered her pink, fuzzy head with gentle kisses. There was no doubt about it; Sarah really had killed her.

"How could you, Sarah? How *could* you?"

Sarah blew a laugh through her nose and groaned.

"You really have lost it, haven't you? You've always been kind of a sociopath, Walter, but now you've really gone over the edge."

"You didn't have to *kill* her!"

"Yeah, Walt. I did. That thing came up here to kill me. Tear me apart like all the others. What am I supposed to do, lay down and just fucking *take it*?"

“So beautiful,” Walt mumbled, ignoring his sister completely. “Oh, Gwyn. Perfect, perfect Gwyn.”

“Disgusting,” Sarah scoffed under her breath.

She crouched and then sat down on the paneling. The adrenaline was receding and Sarah was beginning to realize how sore she was. Her palms burned from the steel cable scraping against them. And though the monster was dead, she remained tethered to the support beam—with Walt so far gone he was unlikely to ever let her go.

“Damn it,” she whispered as she dropped her chin to her knees.

Walt just wept, clutching at the nude corpse in his arms. For a moment, Sarah considered giving him some of the same, but that would not set her free. It would only result in two corpses rotting beside her until her own death eventually came to pass. At least by letting Walt live he would probably take the revolting dead thing away.

The sick son of a bitch will probably eat it.

How long until he decides to kill and eat me, too?

Her imagination turning dark and beginning to run wild, Sarah felt a shiver work its way up her spine. She swallowed hard and her ears popped as though she were at a high altitude. Then she heard the pop again and realized it was not in her ears. It was outside, just below the vents.

It was the sound of car doors slamming shut.

“I’m staying in the car.”

Alice folded her arms and pouted after saying that. Nora pursed her lips and shook her head.

“Fine,” she said. “Do what you like. But I’m not leaving the engine running just to keep you warm.”

Nora got out of the car, shut the door and headed for the house. She was at the front door when she heard Alice’s door slam shut and her small feet scrape the walkway toward the porch. Nora smiled.

“I’m not going to freeze my butt off,” Alice explained. Nora gave the girl a reassuring pat on the shoulder. Then she knocked on the door.

After several minutes dragged by and no one came to the door, Nora knocked again. Alice sighed and said, “He’s not here.”

“Maybe not,” Nora said. But she waited anyway.

There was still no answer.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea,” Alice said after a protracted and uncomfortable silence. “Why don’t you take me home now?”

Nora furrowed her brow. The kid really wanted to get home, but that put a kink in her plans. She was not particularly interested in getting slapped with a kidnapping charge, but if Walt *was* home then he was going to be prepared when Nora came back. She did not want him to be prepared. She wanted him off guard and red handed. She balled up a fist and pounded hard on the door.

The latch clicked and the door swung open several inches. Alice took in a sharp breath as Nora waltzed boldly though the door.

“What are you doing?” Alice whispered conspiratorially.

“Getting to the bottom of this,” Nora responded at a normal conversational volume. She vanished into the house.

Alice shifted her weight from one foot to the other, afraid to follow Nora in but just as nervous about waiting on the porch. Mr. Blackmore could come back home at any time, find her standing there. What would he think? Probably nothing quite as bad as he’d think if he found her breaking and entering. Either way seemed bad. But it was cold outside, so Alice made up her mind and went into the house.

It was dark inside, but there was enough light filtering in through the windows to see where they were going. Alice gently and quietly shut the door as Nora advanced through the foyer and into the living room. Everywhere there was clutter, like the occupant of the house had only just moved in and hadn’t finished unpacking. It smelled musky and dank. Nora wrinkled her nose and crossed over to the dining room. It was even darker in there, due to all the boxes that were stacked up against the room’s only window. It was also mustier than the other rooms Nora had visited so far. There was a sickly sweet odor in the air, almost metallic. It was like rust and mildew. Nora made a face and

continued through the room and into the hallway beyond.

Alice went the other way, into the kitchen. She jumped a little when Nora appeared in the adjacent hallway.

“Just me,” Nora said.

“*Shhh!*”

Nora narrowed her eyes and, ignoring Alice admonition to silence, cupped a hand to the side of her mouth and called out: “Walt? Walt Blackmore? Are you home?”

Alice’s eyes bulged.

“Jesus, Nora!” she hissed. “Be quiet!”

“I’m not here to rob the place, kid. I have to talk to this guy.” She then resumed her booming shout. “Walt Blackmore! My name is Nora, I’m a friend of Amanda’s! I need to talk with you, Walt!”

“Great,” Alice groaned. “He’s obviously not here. Can we go before he comes home and finds us in his house, please?”

Nora wagged a finger at Alice without looking at her. “Just a minute,” she said.

Alice growled with frustration.

Nora checked the bedroom next. She found a light switch and flipped it. The room was strewn with dirty clothes. The sheets on the unmade bed were filthy and mottled with brown stains. She sneered at the repulsive mess and went back to the hall.

"There's no one here," she said quietly, mostly to herself.

"I told you that already," Alice grumbled.

"You were guessing."

"I was right."

Nora gritted her teeth. The kid had a hell of an attitude problem, and it was getting to her, but she knew practically all kids that age were pretty much the same way. Besides, Nora had all but forced Alice to join her on this adventure, so she could not really blame the girl for getting so grouchy. She unclenched her jaw and went over to the kid in the kitchen.

"Okay, maybe next time. How about we go get some burgers and shakes? My treat. You know, for ruining your snow day."

A faint smile played at the corners of the chubby girl's lips.

"Yeah," she said. "All right."

Nora placed a hand on the middle of Alice's back and gently guided her back to the front door. It had been a wash, but she was far from done with the elusive Walt Blackmore. He had to come back home sometime, and when he did, Nora would be waiting. And even if she never got him on his own turf, she now knew what he did for a living. He was Alice's English teacher, which meant he would be back at school as soon as the weather cleared up. One way or another, a confrontation was coming. Nora was going to get some answers about what happened to her best friend.

Alice finally let herself smile, and she looked a little guilty doing it. The young girl reached for the doorknob and gave it a twist. The hinges squealed slightly as she stepped to the side, opening the door for Nora.

Nora let out a stilted gasp. The man on the front porch hefted an axe over his head and quickly sent the blade crashing down into the middle of her skull. Nora's head split open as the axe head sank down to the handle. Her arms jutted out, her hands and fingers dancing spasmodically for a minute before she drooped and collapsed in a heap on the floor. The man jammed a booted foot against Nora's sternum for leverage to extract the axe from her face. Blood and chunky gray globs of brain spurted out of the broad wound when the axe came free.

Alice stumbled backward, her thick lips working rapidly but unable to make a sound. Mr. Blackmore stepped into the foyer and gave the axe a hard shake. Blood and flecks of bone flew from the blade, splattering the facing wall. He turned his cold gaze on Alice and brought his eyebrows together in a sharp V.

"Alice?"

A wet sob exploded from deep in the girl's chest. Spittle and snot sprayed out of her face and she began to tremble all over.

"You shouldn't be here, Alice," Mr. Blackmore said as he nudged Nora's body out of the way of the door with the axe. "You shouldn't be here at all."

He kicked the front door and it slammed shut.

Chapter Fifty-Two

His back and ankles aching from the drop out the attic vent, Walt stumbled awkwardly toward the terrified teenage girl. The bloody axe hung limply from his three-fingered hand, the nubs of the former two shone red from all the exertion. Up in the attic, he'd only heard the one woman's voice. Walt was not prepared for Alice's unexpected presence in the house. He did not know what to do with her.

Alice visibly shook as she backed up to the wall. Once she was flat against it, she began moving sideways toward the kitchen. Walt just watched her slow movements, careful to keep her in view while his addled mind searched for an answer to the quandary he faced.

Tiny whimpers spilled out of the girl's wobbling lips. Her knees faltered as if any moment they would buckle and send her crashing to the floor. His crippled hand growing tired, Walt switched the axe to his other hand. Alice cried out and bolted through the kitchen.

"Alice!" Walt screamed hoarsely.

He gave chase, and by the time he made it into the kitchen the back door was already slamming shut.

"Shit!"

Walt's feet pounded the linoleum as he strained to maintain enough energy and momentum to pursue Alice. His ankles throbbed and his lungs were already burning before he even made it to the backyard. But he could see her now, pumping her arms and legs like a cartoon

runner in her mad dash for the field between Walt's backyard and the tree line in the distance. Walt tightened his grip on the axe handle and ran after her.

The snow crunched under his feet and slowed his progress. Somehow Alice kept right on running, unimpeded by the four-inch deep hindrance. Walt just got it in his boots, soaking his socks and freezing his feet. This was the stuff he and Sarah would scoop up in plastic cups when they were children, pour vanilla or maple syrup on it and eat it quickly before it melted. Now it was just preventing Walt from killing that interfering girl as quickly as he'd like.

A fox skittered over the surface of the snow at the edge of the woods as Alice disappeared into its thick growth. To Walt she seemed miles away. His chest ached and his breath came in shorter and shorter bursts. Still, he forced himself to keep moving. To let her get away would be nothing short of suicide.

Walt had no choice in the matter. Alice had to die, even if he had a heart attack in the process. He was not particularly delighted by the prospect of killing an adolescent girl—much less one of his own students—but as far as Walt was concerned she'd brought it upon herself by walking into his house.

He made it across the snowy field and ducked into the dense copse of trees at its edge. Between the icy snow and the dead leaves and the sundry broken branches that littered the ground, Walt could hear nothing over the deafening crunches of his own steps.

Nevertheless, he had a fairly good notion of where Alice would end up heading. There really wasn't anyplace else for her to go.

The faded red farmhouse exploded into view the moment Alice cleared the woods. Her face was chilled with cold sweat and every muscle in her body screamed at her to stop running, but she pounded on toward the house. Mr. Blackmore might have looked fitter than her, but he was still floundering somewhere back in the trees, unable to catch up with her. So Alice raced down the hill and across the tall, unkempt grass in the front yard. She was already screaming before she got to the door.

"Help! Help me! *Somebody!*"

The heavyset girl barreled toward the front door only to find it standing wide open upon her arrival. She skidded to a halt and paused to catch her breath. Off to her left a ragged pigpen was hidden in the knee-high grass, its railings rotting and broken. One pig rooted around in the mud there, snorting and snuffling. Alice dismissed the animal and turned back to the house. The last time she'd just walked into somebody's house had not turned out well for her. She did not even know who lived in this one. Still, the chances that the only two houses in the area were both owned by psycho murderers seemed too remote to seriously consider. Alice screwed up her face and looked over her shoulder.

Mr. Blackmore had emerged from the woods and was huffing down the hill, his arms pinwheeling and his face crimson with rage. Alice gasped and rushed into the old house.

All at once the senses-shattering miasma of rot and decay slammed Alice in the face. The house smelled like a slaughterhouse, or at least what she imagined one would be like. Blood and shit and decomposition lingered in the air like fog, but she could not see anything that might have caused it. The carpets were caked with mud, picture frames knocked over and china broken on the floor, but apart from that the house seemed relatively normal. She wrinkled her nose and clamped a hand over her face. It was almost too much to bear.

“Alice!” Walt hollered angrily from the front yard.

Alice shrieked, a Chihuahua’s yap, and made a beeline for the adjacent staircase. The stench only worsened as she ascended to the upper floor, but there was no turning back now. Blackmore was already in the house.

“Goddamnit, stop!” he screamed from the bottom of the stairs. “Get back here, Alice! Come down here *right now!*”

Alice almost wanted to laugh at him using his teacher voice at a time like this. It might have been funny if the man was not carrying an axe he’d just used to split a woman’s face in two. She turned into the dusky hallway,

away from the stairs. Blackmore growled like an animal and started stomping up after her.

“I’m coming, Alice! I’m *coming!*”

He was snarling his words now, grating them out his throat harshly and powerfully. Alice sniveled as she hurried down the hall and into an ink-dark room. She quickly found the edge of the door and pushed it shut. She locked it. Then she began searching the wall for a light switch. She found one and flipped it, but nothing came on. The house must have been abandoned, she reasoned. *But what in hell is that awful smell?* It was so strong now her eyes stung and watered. As her eyes gradually adjusted to the lack of light, she noticed dim yellow hazes on either side of the room. Windows.

Alice tumbled across to the nearest one, tripping over something that squished against her foot and rolled away. Ignoring it, she reached out and grabbed handfuls of the window curtains and yanked them open. The dying afternoon sunlight leaked in through the dusty glass panes, illuminating what Alice could now see was a bedroom.

A loud crack echoed. Blackmore laughed maniacally on the other side of the door. Another crack and the wood of the door began to split and splinter. He was chopping through it with the axe.

Tears silently ran in steady rivulets down Alice’s face as she scanned the room for something—anything—to use for defense. And the first thing her eyes settled upon was a rotting human head on the floor. It was what

Alice tripped over, what squished warm and soft against her toes. She drew in a sharp breath as she rapidly backed away from the hideous thing. When the axe finally broke through the door, she lost her footing and fell backward on the bed.

"I'm coming I'm coming *I'm coming I'M COMINGGGG*," Walt babbled through the thin split in the door.

Alice planted her hands on either side of her to heft herself up, but she slid on the slippery ooze that coated the comforter. She had been so focused on Blackmore and his axe that she failed to realize what she was lying in. The entire bed was covered with malodorous, rotting mire. Alice clamped her mouth shut and frantically looked all around her. At the head of the bed lay a human body, its flesh greenish brown and dripping off its splintered bones. The torso had been ripped open as though it exploded from within. The jaw yawned open with no tendons to support it, and the sunken, ghostly face stared without eyes.

Alice screamed and rolled off on the other side, under the other window. When she crashed against the floor she found herself face to face with a filth covered pig. Its entire head was awash in mud and shit and rot. The animal bucked and squealed at her. It was gnawing on the few tattered chunks of flesh that still clung to the brown, broken skeleton on the floor. Alice leapt over the pig and hurried back to the first window. She

unlocked the latch as heaved it open as Blackmore's axe burst through the door again.

"I hardly ever wanted this, Alice," Blackmore shouted as he hacked the door apart. "It's an anathema to me, I swear it. Damn bloody work, but I've got to. I've got to do it for Gwyn, don't you see that?"

The door finally came apart when Walt delivered a sound kick to it, rupturing the hollow wood right down the middle and opening the room up for him. Alice wasted no time. She climbed up onto the window ledge and leapt out.

She felt no pain or discomfort when she landed on the slushy ground, two stories beneath the bedroom window. Only when Alice broke back into a sprint did her ankles throb and complain, sending white hot messages of radiating pain to her spinning brain. She ignored it. The dilapidated barn a hundred yards ahead of her commanded all of her attention for the moment.

Like the house, the barn had once been painted red as well. Now what little paint that had survived time, the elements and probably decades of neglect was a faded pink. The rest of the decrepit structure was gray and brown; black where the wood was rotted completely through. The barn's roof was half caved in at one corner and the crater formed there was filled with forest detritus and debris. Some manner of birds had made a nice home of it.

The barn doors yawned open before Alice as she pumped her tired, aching legs as hard as she could in her

mad dash for the barn's relative safety. She was fairly sure Blackmore did not follow her through the window, but that only meant he would race back down to the front door and come running after her any second. She was right about that—as soon as she plunged into the cold darkness of the abandoned barn, she saw the insane teacher round the house. He was screaming like a Viking berserker and holding the axe over his head as he crossed the yard with astonishing speed. Alice whimpered and pushed deeper into the stuffy shadows.

Almost immediately she tripped over something long and metal, a farming instrument she could not identify if she tried. She slammed into it with her knees and pitched forward, tumbling over and smacking against a spiny post with a resounding thud. The accident kicked up a cloud of dust that filled the air and got in Alice's nose and mouth. She hacked and sneezed. The silhouette between the open barn doors laughed and readjusted the axe.

“Bless you, child,” Blackmore said derisively.

Something in Alice's subconscious suggested that she plead for her life, but her reason informed her that such a pathetic display would do her no good. A man like this felt no sympathy. He was too far gone. Instead, she heaved herself back up and scrambled into the corner, her hands thrust out in front of her. She felt blindly in the darkness for something to save her, a weapon or a means of escape. She found dry, frayed ropes and slippery piles of rotten hay. A plastic broom handle and

a burlap sack half filled with dirt or seed. Then the corner, which was solid and offered no means of egress. No matter how much she fought it, despair was beginning to set in. Alice pounded her fist against the wall. She might as well have tried to push over a skyscraper.

She sank to her knees and let herself drop back against the wall. A tiny, quiet sob came out of her. When something smacked hard like metal against wood, she knew Mr. Blackmore was only a few yards away. A thin, dry chuckle trickled out of his throat like sand.

This is it, Alice told herself. This is how I die.

She covered her face with her gelid, trembling hands and waited for the axe to fall.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Stupid girl.

Walt could hear her sniveling back there. Undoubtedly she believed she was hiding well, masked by the total darkness of the barn, but he could *hear* her. Sobbing. Giving up.

A smile cut across Walt's stiff, winterbeaten face.

Gwyn was going to be so pleased with him, happy as a newlywed when he brought home *this* bacon.

"Here, piggy, piggy, piggy," he sang. "It's time to come out now. Farmer Walt's got something nice for you." He laughed. "Nice and *sharp*."

"No," the girl whispered.

Walt shook his head.

"No? *No?* You don't tell me *no!* *You* don't tell me *anything!*"

He was surprised by his own sudden switch from mirth to rage, but he embraced it. And he charged toward the corner of the barn, lifting the axe high over his head. As he charged, he screamed with frenzied anger.

When he was sure that he was close enough to reach her, Walt brought the axe down.

So pleased.

Bacon for Gwyn.

Piggy piggy piggy.

Abruptly Walt felt a sharp pull and he was yanked backward. Not just backward, but back and up. The axe

fell out of his hands and made two rapid thudding sounds as it hit whatever was beneath him. Not Alice. Just dirt and useless farming supplies. He squealed and clawed at his neck. He felt rope, scratchy and frayed but strong enough to hold his weight. His face flooded with blood and the fusty air was difficult to gulp. His temples throbbed painfully.

Someone had roped him like a steer and he was beginning to black out.

Who?

Alice heard the impact, the drop of the axe, but she felt no pain. She supposed it was the same thing as her ankles when she dropped out of the high, second story window. The pain had not come right away then, either. In just a second or two, though, she knew the agony would finally reach her fear-addled mind and then Alice would know she was cut and bleeding and dying. So she squeezed her eyes tightly closed and waited for it.

But it never came.

Instead, her senses only registered the cold and the stifling, decayed air and the muted gagging sound that seemed to emanate from above. Alice opened her eyes, half expecting to see what happened. The dark remained. The muffled retching continued. That, and the creak of an old rope pulled taut and slowly swinging to and fro.

All Alice wanted to do was curl up into as small a ball as possible and disappear. She was still alive and relatively unharmed, but the nerve-biting fear had not subdued in the least. She swallowed hard. Her throat was dry and sore.

“Hello?” she whispered.

“Hurry,” a feminine voice called back. It sounded like it came from the rafters.

“Hello? Who’s there?”

“I will not hold him forever. Come and help.”

“What,” Alice began. The words got caught in her throat. She swallowed again and cleared her throat.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Come here. Find him with your hands.”

“Find who? Mr. Blackmore?”

“Who else?” The voice *tsked*.

“Who...who are you?”

“I can just drop him if you prefer. Let him get his axe back and hack you to bits.”

“No!”

“Then come here, girl.”

Alice slowly rose to her feet. Her weight seemed to crush her throbbing ankles. She winced and took a step forward.

“What do you want me to do?” she hesitantly asked the disembodied voice.

“I’ve got him strung up by a rope. But he must have gotten his fingers between the loop and his neck. He is struggling, but he is not dying.”

Alice felt the blood drain out of her face. “God,” she said softly.

“This is kill or be killed, child,” the voice continued. “When I let go of the rope, if Walt is still alive he will chop you apart. Do you understand?”

Alice’s breath came in short, shuddery bursts.

“I asked you if you understand me, child.”

“Y—Yes, I understand.”

“Excellent. Find the axe.”

“What?”

“The axe!” the voice angrily bellowed.

“Okay! But...what for?”

“Surely you would not have lived through this ordeal so long if you are as stupid as you sound.”

“I’m *not* stupid.”

“No?”

“No! I’m not!”

Despite her terror and befuddlement, the accusation rankled Alice. She knew that she was fat and that she was awkward, but the charge of stupidity would not stand. If she anything going for her at all, it was her smarts. Her neck flashed hot and she sneered in the dark, wishing the stranger could see it. Wishing she could see the bizarre stranger.

“Then do as I tell you. Find the axe.”

“All right, fine.”

Falling into a crouch, Alice fanned her arms out and commenced the search. Everything she touched was cold and rough against her palms. Layers of grime and

dust coated everything inside the barn. She did not like it at all.

After groping at clods of earth and pebbles and what felt like a greasy engine part, Alice came upon the handle of the axe. She brushed her fingers up the shaft until she felt the cool, sticky head of the thing. Then she picked it up with both hands and stood back up again.

"I've got it," she said sheepishly.

"Can you hear him struggling?" the voice asked with macabre glee.

Alice listened. She could.

"Yes."

"Musical, isn't it?"

Blackmore wheezed and croaked. Something in his throat clicked wetly. Alice did not find it musical at all. To her it sounded horrific.

"If you say so," she said.

The voice laughed softly. "Follow the sound, girl. Find him. Find him and kill him."

Alice gasped. Some naïve part of her wanted to believe that the stranger in the rafters only wanted her to get the axe for defense, for protection. Her more reasonable faculties knew that this was not true from the start, but Alice sometimes chose to ignore that voice. She'd ignored it now, but the heavy truth of the matter ended up smashing into her like a sixteen-wheeler.

"No!" she cried. "I can't!"

"You must. You don't want to die, do you?"

"I'll call the cops. I'll go back into the house and call them..."

"There's no phone there. The line is dead."

"Then I'll call from *his* house."

"I can't hold him that long."

Can't or won't? Alice wondered.

"Use the axe," Alice offered.

"That's your job."

"I meant to hold him. Until the police arrive."

"Kill him!" the voice suddenly roared.

Alice jumped. She was starting to feel as afraid of the owner of that deceptively feminine voice as she was of Walt Blackmore.

"KILL HIM!" it screamed again, louder this time.

"But I can't!" Alice sobbed. "I won't!"

A loud sigh drifted down from above.

"Then I will let him go," the exasperated voice said.
"Good luck, Alice."

Alice heard the whine of the rope skidding over wood, followed by a thump. Blackmore coughed and hacked. He moved around, adjusting this and scraping that. Then he said, "Bitch."

Alice shook and gripped the axe handle more tightly.

"Bitch!" Walt rasped wrathfully.

Dirt and rocks scratched and kicked up. Blackmore groaned, and the groan turned into a mad wail. His feet pounded the ground as he lunged for Alice.

"NOW ALICE!" the voice cried.

Alice swung the axe as hard as she could. It halted abruptly in mid-swing, blade meeting flesh. Blackmore moaned. Then his grubby fingers found Alice's face and neck and clawed at her.

"Fuck...ing...kill...you," he gasped.

Alice shrieked, half from fear and half from the adrenaline rush of her fury. She kicked Blackmore with the flat of her foot, separating him from the axe. He dropped to the ground like dead weight. Alice bolted for the barn doors, for the light.

Blackmore gurgled and grunted. And then he lifted himself up again and came at Alice. He emerged from the darkness covered in dirt. Foamy blood flecked his lips and face. He held one hand firmly against his midsection. Blood bubbled up between his fingers.

His grimy face was twisted from pain and anger, but he forced a strained grin.

"I'm afraid I'm going...to have to...give you an F...Alice," he croaked. Scarlet saliva sprayed out of his mouth with every word. His teeth were stained red.

Alice gave a wild scream and ran at him with the axe hefted over one shoulder. Blackmore had no time to react; in a second the glistening blade tore into the side of his face and cut clean through to the other side. A wet, red slab of flesh curled off the front of his skull and dropped to the snow with a dull splat. Blackmore wobbled for a moment, and then fell backward. He landed hard without so much as bending his knees.

Alice hyperventilated and stared with shiny, bulging eyes at the fruit of her labor. Walt Blackmore's face was almost completely sheared off, leaving a cross-section of his head that exposed brain and bone before quickly filling up with dark, claret-colored blood. Half an eyeball bobbed at the surface of the steaming fluid, tethered to a stringy red stalk. When the blood spilled over, a ruby red puddle blotted out the erstwhile white snow all around the body.

Alice emitted a wet, mucousy sob and let the dripping axe fall into the snow. Mr. Blackmore, her ninth grade English teacher in whom she had found a kind of kindred spirit only hours earlier, was dead by her hand.

"I killed him," she said too quietly to hear. "Oh god...oh my god."

A series of sharp slaps erupted from the shadows inside the barn. Alice lifted her head to see what it was. Her head felt ten times heavier than it should, as though it was filled with concrete.

From the darkness emerged a completely nude woman. Her hair was shaved down to a buzz cut, her flawless skin nearly as white as the snow into which she walked, barefoot. The woman was clapping her hands and grinning from ear to ear.

"Bravo, Alice," she purred. "Bravo!"

She did not look cold at all; her skin was not pink and she did not shiver. She merely applauded and smiled like a proud parent at a spelling bee. When she reached the

gruesome remains of Walt Blackmore, she gave him nothing more than a brief glance before spreading her arms out like wings and looking adoringly into Alice's eyes. Her large, firm breasts bounced freely. Alice could not help but notice that the nipples were not even erect, as they should have been in the bitter cold.

Alice stared. There was puzzlement and wonder in the stare, but she was too exhausted to say anything. After the sensory overload of fear and rage and the grisly killing of the dead madman in the snow, she had nothing left to say.

The naked woman wrapped her arms around Alice and squeezed her into a tight embrace. Alice did not resist her.

"What a day," the woman whispered into Alice's ear. She delivered a quick, cold kiss on Alice's neck. "But everything is going to be all right, now. Everything is going to be just fine."

SPRING

Ophelia

Chapter Fifty-Four

Her side of the bed was warm from her own body heat, but when Alice rolled over she found the bed sheets to be cool, as if they had not been slept in. Shrinking away from the sudden chill of that side, she quickly returned to the familiar comfort of her own warmth. That was when she felt the dampness underneath her, soaking against her thigh. Once more Alice switched sides in the bed and then threw back the blankets to investigate.

The late morning sun shone through the cracks in the blinds, delivering a hazy saffron glow to the dinner plate sized bloodstain on the fitted sheet. Alice exhaled noisily.

“Goddamn it,” she grumbled.

The boy’s boxers she wore to bed—white with a yellow smiley face on the seat—were soaked through as well. The formerly white cotton was now bright red and glistening from the crotch of the underwear all the way down to her thighs. Her period had come a week early, just as it had the month before and the month before that. Ever since she moved in with Ophelia, as it happened. Alice had never actually observed any signs that Ophelia suffered from the monthly visitor herself, but she was young and healthy and surely did. Alice supposed her cycle was just adjusting to more closely match that of Ophelia’s. A hundred women’s magazines had insisted to her that such things were common, that it

happened all the time. She was just going to have to get used to the new routine.

Alice threw her prickly legs over the edge of the mattress and sucked in a sharp breath when her bare toes touched the cold hardwood floor. Winter was gone, but the mornings were still too chilly for her taste. Once there had been a large Oriental rug on the floor in this room, but it got ruined by all the blood and dirt and human offal. There just wasn't anything for a mess like that. The rug had to go.

Now Alice quickly tiptoed across the room to where her fuzzy bunny slippers rested, right beside the bedroom door where she left them. She shoved her pudgy feet into the slippers and wiggled her toes. It felt good. Then she grabbed a fresh pair of boxers out of the wardrobe at the foot of the bed and padded down the hallway to the bathroom.

Sliding the soiled boxers down her legs, Alice felt the sting of the stubble there and decided to shave her legs before stepping into the shower. She felt like she was a royal mess, as though she woke up a phenomenally less attractive girl than the one she'd been when she'd gone to bed. Standing in the middle of the bathroom in nothing but the white A-shirt she'd woken up in, Alice turned to get a look at herself in the mirror. She did not particularly like what she saw. Cheeks too round and ruddy, breasts already beginning to sag despite her scant fifteen years, nipples enormous and too puffy, which she could see even through the shirt. Her hair was greasy

and needed cutting. If she squinted she was sure she could make out the faintest trace of a moustache coming in on her upper lip.

I'm a fucking hag, she silently told herself.

Alice pouted.

Behind her, from the hallway, Ophelia said, "Beautiful girl."

Alice flashed her a look of incredulity.

"Angelic," Ophelia added.

Alice cocked her head to one side and pursed her lips. Per usual, Ophelia was not wearing a stitch of clothing. Her shoulder-length, blood-red hair was shiny and perfect, even though she never brushed it. The triangle of equally red hair between her legs jutted out in wild spirals. Alice thought it complemented her faultless alabaster skin. Ophelia's eyes met hers, then slowly worked their way down the length of Alice's body. When Alice realized that Ophelia was seeing the bloodied place between her stubbly legs, she threw her hands over her groin and flushed red.

"I started my period. While I was sleeping. It got all over the fucking bed."

Ophelia smiled, although it did not show in her icy blue eyes. It rarely ever did.

"Out, damned spot," she said gleefully.

"That was Lady Macbeth," Alice said mock-pedantically, "not Ophelia."

Ophelia only grinned by way of response.

Pulling the A-shirt up and over her head, Alice bent naked over the bathtub faucet and started the water running. Over the crashing din of the tub, she looked over her shoulder at the stunning red-haired beauty in the doorway.

“Where were you, by the way? When I woke up you were gone. The bed was cold.”

Ophelia answered, “Breakfast.”

Alice knitted her brow. The water was hot enough to her liking now, so she pulled the plunger that shut off the faucet and turned on the shower head.

“Oh,” she said.

“All gone now, our Walt.”

A brief tremor rocked Alice’s stomach. So much blood. So much awful violence. Necessary, yes. But so repugnant to her.

First, Ophelia ate the woman; Blackmore’s sister, she said. That bounty lasted her three weeks, and that was really parceling it out. She had explained to Alice that the dead woman was her brother’s partner-in-crime, as it were, that together they were responsible for the deaths of those two nasty boys from school. There were others, too—the bones in the lime pit and the putrefied corpses in the bedroom Alice and Ophelia now called their own. But Ophelia’s hands were not sullied by the blood of murder. She *had* to eat, but she was no killer. It took plenty of time for Alice to process the fantastic, singularly grotesque nature of the thing, and even now it turned her stomach to think about so much death and

rot, and to remember what she had done to Mr. Blackmore. It was all for the best, however; this she knew and at least vaguely understood. Alice loved Ophelia, truly and deeply loved her in a way she had never loved anybody before. The strange and incredible woman came into her life in a burst of terror and bloodshed, but ever since that dreadful winter day Ophelia had done nothing but take care of her. She was Alice's only friend; her mother, big sister and lover all rolled into one.

And, had it not been for Ophelia, that monster Blackmore would surely have chopped poor, young Alice to bits of splattered flesh and broken bone.

Of course he was the next to slide down the ravishing Ophelia's gullet, piece by raw, bloody piece. And as of that morning, according to the elder woman's report, nothing edible was left of the late lunatic killer.

"He is dead and gone, lady," Ophelia recited with dramatic flourish. "He is dead and gone; at his head a grass-green turf, at his heels a stone."

Alice smiled in spite of her troubling thoughts; she even gave a little laugh.

"Not *that's* Ophelia," she said warmly as she stepped under the hot spray.

The afternoon was spent doing chores around and outside the farmhouse. Alice cut the grass and painted the front door and fed their one remaining pig. Soon she

would slaughter it just as she had the other one. Like Ophelia, she too had to eat.

For her part, Ophelia changed the linens on the bed and flipped the mattress, since the blood had leaked through to stain it. After that, when a tired and sweaty Alice came back into the house, Ophelia prepared a sumptuous hot lunch of pork loin with garlic for Alice and pan-seared flank of Walt Blackmore for herself. It was what remained of her breakfast and, indeed, of Walt.

Alice dug into her lunch with gusto; the yard work had built up a mighty appetite in her. Only twice did she glance up at her companion as the tall, buxom woman poked a sliver of pink, rare meat into her mouth with her fork. Once, not long after Alice first began to accept Ophelia for who and what she was, Alice gave in and sampled a bite of the anthropophagus' meal. In that instance, it was the woman from the attic, Walt's sister Sarah, from whom the meat was cut. A thick slice of what Ophelia dubbed "back bacon," it was sweet and not at all unpleasant to Alice's palate. Which was precisely why she never dined on human meat again—the last thing Alice wanted was to turn herself into a cannibal, craving the succulent taste of her fellow man.

Ophelia swallowed the sliver of meat and dabbed at her mouth with the cloth napkin from her naked lap.

"Empty now," she said matter-of-factly, gesturing toward the icebox in the corner of the kitchen.

Alice gazed at the large, humming box. It was the last item they had taken from Walt's house before Alice

lit the match that ignited the blaze. All that night and into the following morning the old gable front house burned tangerine orange and schoolhouse red until at last it was finally reduced to ashes. Alice even had a pretty good story ready for when the fire marshal and investigating police came knocking on the farmhouse door asking questions. But they never came. It was the last they ever had anything to do with the legacy of Walt Blackmore. Except, of course, for his meat.

Alice sped up her chewing and swallowed a mouthful of pork, trying like hell not to think about the sight of that very pig feasting on the remains of the house's prior occupants.

"What do you suppose we should do?" she asked.

"I think you know," Ophelia gravely answered.

Even though her mouth was now empty, Alice swallowed again anyway. Her throat bobbed and gurgled. She was not happy about where this was going.

"Not that, Ophelia," she said glumly. "Not yet. I—I can't."

"You've said *that* before."

"It's too awful. I don't even want to think about it."

"All you have to do is make a phone call. I will deal with everything after that."

"Where? In the barn?"

"It is as good a place as any."

Alice heaved a weighty sigh. She looked down at her plate and her stomach did a flip. Her appetite was dead and gone.

“And what then? After that, I mean? Who will be next? And then after that?”

“We’ll find out.”

“Before it was all...circumstantial. Now you want us to start...”

She could not make herself pronounce the word. *Killing.*

Ophelia dropped her eyelids halfway down over her pale, glinting eyes and rose from her chair. She rounded the kitchen table to where Alice sat, squatted beside her and placed a cool, gentle hand on the girl’s bare knee. An involuntary tremble worked its way throughout Alice’s body. It was the same every time. Ophelia’s touch thrilled her.

“I watched you slaughter the pig. That one right there.” She pointed at the half-eaten pork loin on Alice’s plate. “You swung the axe, severed the jugular. You never even flinched at all the blood.”

Alice sulked childishly. “I’d had practice,” she said ominously.

“You have to when you’re self-sufficient like we are. We have no one upon whom to depend but each other. And we have to eat, both of us. I never asked to be this way, darling...”

Darling. Ophelia was bringing out the big guns, now.

“I know you didn’t.”

“I was dead. I was nothing. Then I just came back. And I came back...like this.”

Alice knew all of this. Ophelia told her the whole sordid story after the fire, how she was cut to ribbons by her own kin and left to bleed to death in that very same house, long ago. A horrible time and a horrible life. Why she returned she could not tell because she did not know herself. She simply did, gradually, and she would have died a second time had it not been for a steady diet of the very stuff she was made of. It kept her together, she said. It made her whole. Alice could not argue with that. Not when it meant life or death for the other half of her own heart.

“I know,” she whispered. “I know.”

Tears formed in her eyes, blurring her vision before spilling over her eyelids and dribbling down her round, pink cheeks. Ophelia wiped them away with her thumb on one side and kissed them away on the other. That only made Alice cry harder.

“Shh, darling,” Ophelia cooed. “Shhhhh.”

Chapter Fifty-Five

After she hung the phone back on its hooks, Alice realized she was holding her breath. She let it out slowly, like a balloon leaking out of pinprick. Then she waited.

A little more than an hour later, as the horizon turned a bruisey purple and the sun disappeared behind the woods, the rumble of an oil-deprived engine grew steadily louder outside the house. He was coming, and her knowledge of that fact made Alice's chest feel tight.

She had to let her breath out again when she heard the knocking at the door. Ophelia slipped into the satin robe slung over the back of the kitchen chair, a sacrifice Alice insisted upon. As Ophelia tied the belt around her ample waist, Alice crept cautiously toward the door.

The deadbolt clacked noisily as she turned the knob. The door squealed on its hinges when she opened it.

The tall, gangly man at the door glowered at her with steely eyes and bellowed, "So here you are, you goddamned stupid little bitch!"

The words assaulted Alice as though she'd been punched in the nose. She flinched and stepped aside.

"Come in, Harold."

He sauntered into the house like he had been there a dozen times before.

"Who's fucking place is this, anyway?"

"It's mine."

Harold snorted derisively as he noticed Ophelia for the first time. He raised his eyebrows at the beautiful woman and made an O with his mouth.

“Mine and hers,” Alice corrected herself.

“That so?”

Harold’s face melted back into a scowl.

“You know this bitch is a minor, don’t you?” he growled at Ophelia.

The redhead smiled thinly.

“The only bitch I see here is a pathetic old man,” she seethed.

“I could call the police, you know. I could press fucking charges.”

“Go right ahead,” Ophelia said. “The telephone is on the counter.”

The man stroked his salt and pepper beard and then erupted into a peal of laughter.

“I’d bet you’d like that, you goddamn dyke. Here you only got one broad to play finger-fuck with, but in prison? Hoo boy, wouldn’t that be a fucking buffet for a cunt like you?”

Alice lunged forward. “Don’t talk to her like that, *Harold*,” she snarled.

Harold spun around to face her. His mirth having gone as quickly as it came, he resumed his furious gaze.

“First off, don’t you ever tell me what to do. Get that? And second, you call me Dad, or Father, or Sir. You’ve disrespected your elders long enough, you wretched little bit—”

The raging man fell silent the moment he felt the sharp, ripping pain in his abdomen, as if he was afraid to continue speaking would worsen the agony. Without moving his head he turned his glistening eyes downward to see his stepdaughter's fist up against his belly. Jutting from the back of the fist was a rounded wooden handle. Harold could see nothing of the blade, but he knew it was buried deep in his guts.

"I'll call you whatever I want," Alice said. "Now Ophelia—that gorgeous redhead over there?—I reckon she'll just call you *meat*."

Harold mouthed the word *meat*, but no sound passed his lips.

"And for the life of me," Alice continued, "I don't see why I won't, too."

In her mind she flashed on every terrible, hateful thing the man had ever said and ever done. His appalling physical abuse of her mother that lasted until her death at forty-six. The times he'd get stewed and make passes at the few friends she ever made in all her years at school. The morning she woke up with him in her bed, naked as Adam and snoring drunk.

Tightening her fist even more, Alice jerked the knife up, dragging the blade through soft innards until it jammed against Harold's sternum.

She also thought back to every indignity she had ever suffered at the hands of others. The busy hands and bragging mouth of Joshua Hansen. The terrible, dirty roll in the sheets with Brandon Zuern and his buddy

Hershal's never ceasing smirk, denoting his familiarity with her most private intimacies. Every classmate who called her names and every boy (or girl) to whom she'd given her misplaced trust. All of them monsters, none of them human at all. Not like her. Not like Ophelia. No, indeed—the ones like them, they were just flesh and blood and bone with no soul to speak of in the least. They were nothing more than meat.

Out came the blade and with it a spouting fountain of blood. Harold squealed pig-like as he staggered to one side and clutched at his abdomen with desperate, useless hands. He could do nothing to prevent the ropey gray coils that fell out of his open torso, nor the pulsing spray of his lifeblood pumping out of him, spurt by viscous spurt. Then, with only the quickest of swipes, Alice slashed the gleaming blade across her stepfather's neck, carving the flesh apart in the blink of an eye. Three rapid bursts of wine-dark blood flew out of the severed arteries on either side of Harold's neck, then slowed to a steady dribble. He faltered, lost control of his ankles and knees and everything all at once. Finally he crumpled to the kitchen floor like a pile of dirty laundry. The floor was awash in the dead man's draining fluids; the white and tan design of the floor tiles vanished in the sticky red deluge.

Alice's chest heaved with every massive breath. She gulped at the air, dragged it into her lungs. Her mouth hung open in an animalistic snarl and her eyes looked hooded and far away.

Ophelia untied the silk belt and shrugged out of the robe. She walked around the widening claret pool on the floor and stepped closed to Alice.

“My darling,” she said softly, seductively. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” Alice said between guzzling breaths. “I’m just fine.”

They hung him by his feet in the barn, Alice and Ophelia, with the same rope with which the latter had tried to hang Walt Blackmore. By that point there was precious little blood left to drain from the corpse, so Alice tended to the stripping and washing of the body. Once that was done, she made a long incision down the middle of the back, from the nape of the neck to the crack of the ass. She then set to sawing the flesh from the bone and cartilage, flaying the meat and exposing the glistening vertebrae. These she expected to be excellent cuts. The first of many for at least two weeks of very fine eating.

Of course, two weeks was not a particularly long time. It would be over before either of them knew it. Then they would be hungry again.

But the world was to be their abattoir. Their sex would be the snare. Blood would flow and flesh would be rent from the bones of those they butchered. They would feed then, and it would begin again.

Alice was never happier. She was in love.

And that love was the most beautiful thing on earth.

Dragging the frantic child up the ladder that goes to Papa's attic is no simple feat for Agnes. The girl spits and shrieks like a cat, pumps her legs and throws blind punches behind her. None of them find home. Agnes is much too strong. She climbs the rungs with one hand and pulls the girl by the hair with the other. The child thinks her scalp will tear away from her skull as though she were being mutilated by some Indian brave. But it holds all the way up. All the way up to Papa's half-finished attic. Open air and fresh cut pine beams, rusty old tools Papa got second-hand from the five and dime scattered here and there. The roof is a yawning maw of incomplete crosshatched boards and though the waning dawn moon can see every indignity and every atrocity it does nothing but gape and gawp. Agnes hurls the child over an upended sawhorse. She lands hard on her hip and cries out in pain, cries out with puzzled horror, why Agnes why? Her older sister's eyes glint in the fading moonlight, glowing silver they seem to reflect her innermost badness the core of her being that the girl never knew was there. Papa was mine, Agnes shrieks, he was mine and you took him away. Mine, mine, mine. The girl cannot comprehend the ghastly insinuations or at the very least she must not; it is too horrendous, too sinful to ponder. She clambers to her feet and scrambles to escape but Agnes stands between her and the square hole in the floor where the ladder is still propped up.

Agnes rumbles and roars like a mad-dog and breaks into a clawing dash after the girl, who runs screaming for the open edge, the end of the never completed addition. Just dead end into open air and a drop twelve feet down. She can make it, she knows she can and anyway it has to be better than what crazy Agnes mad lunatic Agnes has in store for her. She bends at the knees, ready to leap, but Agnes has got her again, tight in her grasp. The child flies back as though she is being sucked into a whirlpool and in an instant Agnes is atop of her, slapping her face raw with one hand. The other hand holds up Papa's wood plane. Little more than a brown block with a strap for the carpenter's hand but it has got teeth; nasty, serrated metal teeth that bite and tear and flay. Another sound slap rattles her brains as Agnes lifts up the girl's nightdress and slaps the plane down on her thigh. She screams for leniency, for mercy and sanity and peace. For it all to go away and to start over afresh like it always was between them when Papa was gone for days and it was just the two of them. Sister and soulmates and the best friends in the world. But nothing comes out of her. Maybe an infinitesimal squeak that even she can't hear. The planer's jagged blade bites down into the flesh of the child's thigh and Agnes drags it along the bare, trembling leg, flaying her sister alive. Now she screams. All the world can hear her scream. Even the moon that does nothing but perversely leer at the bloody goings-on can hear the agonized screams of the tortured young girl it passively watches. Agnes strips her flesh away and

grunts with rage and mania and all the child can do is flail her one free arm against the sawdusty boards, making the loose nails dance and the steel square bounce closer to her pain-curved fingers. She feels the cold metal at her fingertips and the sharp right angle of its cruel corner. Then the square is in her fist and when the corner pushes into Agnes' eye the girl can only vaguely understand what she is doing but Agnes roars and the child drives the steel square into her face and neck again and again and again. Like chopping down a tree she hacks at the stalk, the trunk of Agnes' neck until the skin has been all but sheared off and Agnes is reduced to a pulpy, gurgling parody of a person, but not really a person at all. From where the girl stands, her sister looks more like slaughtered game. She continues to hack until the gurgling stops and the eyes stop looking at anything in particular. And then she hacks some more. Eventually, after the helpless moon has gone to its hiding place and the sun is peeking over the treetops, she even manages to get Agnes' head off and with just the steel square and nothing else. She is hot and sweaty and the salty sweat pours into the open meat of her freshly skinned leg and it burns worse than Mama's stove but instead of crying out she laughs. The girl laughs for all she is worth at the red stump between Agnes' shoulders and at Papa's pudding mushed head downstairs—she laughs and laughs and does not believe for a second that she will ever stop laughing because Agnes was a bad girl,

the worst, but now she is dead and the dead don't come back. They just can't; everybody knows that.
The dead never come back.