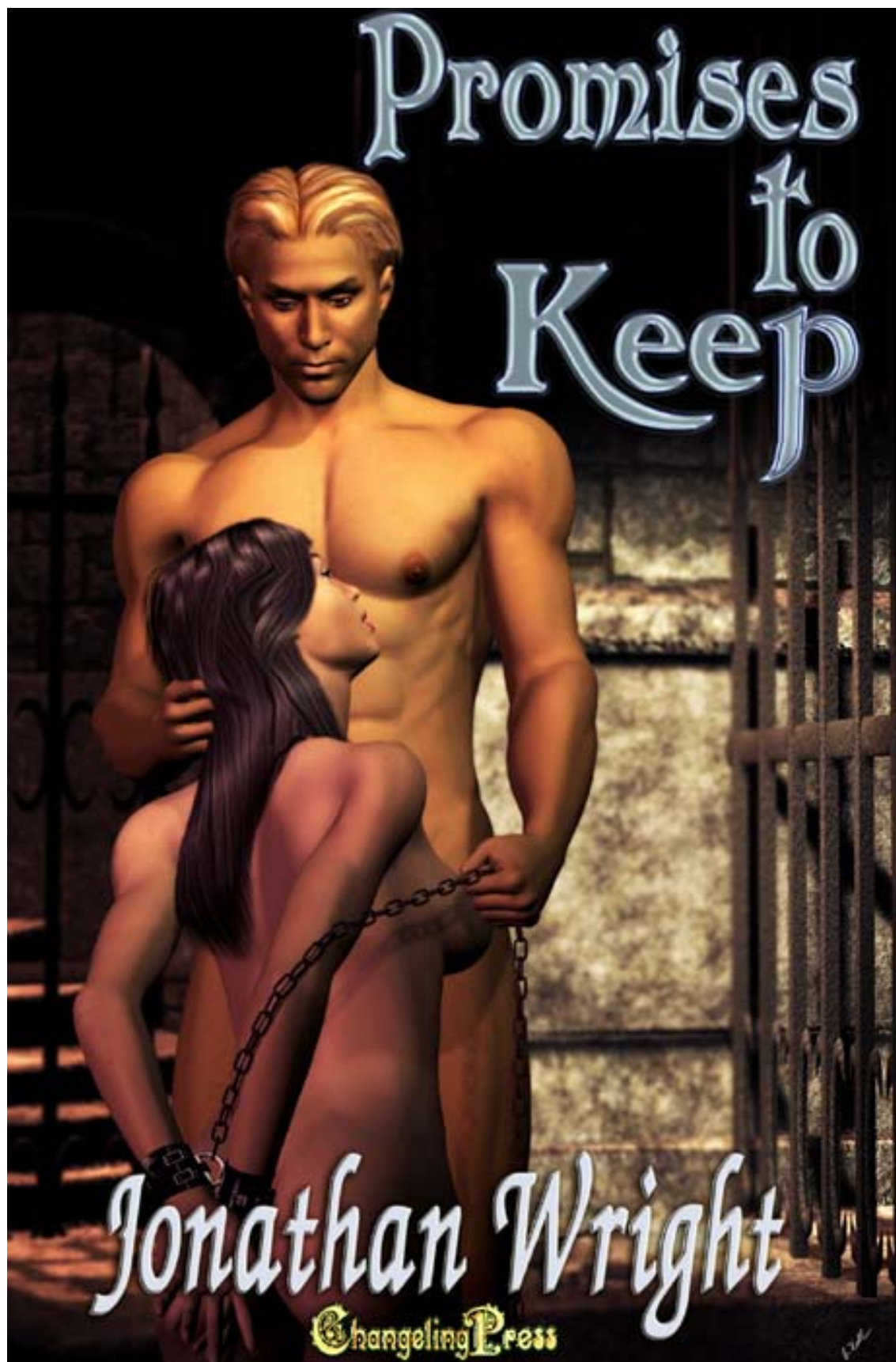


# Promises to Keep



Jonathan Wright

Changeling Press

# **Horn 3: Promises to Keep**

## **Jonathan Wright**

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## Horn 3: Promises to Keep

### Jonathan Wright

*Evil lurks in the shadows...*

A lifetime ago in the jungles of Southeast Asia a hole was torn in the curtain that divides *here* and *there*. A rift was born. Something awakened. Something that wants to destroy the *here*... Joe Horn calls it the Muck Drippy Thing. And if Joe can't close the rift and send Muck Drippy and his friends back where they came from, there will be hell to pay.

Literally.

Fortunately for Joe, he's not alone. He has Sarah. And Raphael. And Sally. And Mitch. And Mary. For a loner with no family and no ties, he's developed a hell of a fan club. Together they might just be strong enough to save humanity from the things that hide in the dark at the top of the stairs...

## Chapter One

Beneath a broad-leafed tree in a green field in Indiana, Sarah writhed in ecstasy. She moved like a dancer, her long, lithe legs wrapped around Raphael's lean waist. Sweat gleamed on the rippling muscles of his torso.

Sarah moaned in savage, sensual hunger. She'd lost track of time, of place, of her sense of self. She understood only the existence of her body, and Raphael's cock impaling her, making her feel beautifully, deliciously helpless.

Raphael braced his thick arms on either side of her, holding himself above her, watching. She gripped his shoulders and thrust her hips against him, lost in the intense pleasure of having his cock inside her. "Oh! Fuck me harder! Please!"

Raphael smiled softly. "You want it harder, sweet thing?"

She made short urgent sounds, little cries and moans in place of coherent speech. "Yes!" she managed as she came.

Raphael clenched his teeth to hold himself in check as he felt her cunt close tighter on his cock. *Christ, what a woman!* He reveled in the feel of her taut body, her plump breasts, her hard nails digging into him.

The moon shone brightly through scudding clouds that threatened rain. In the hot July night sweat ran across his broad back. In spite of his intense enjoyment of this magnificent woman, he remained peripherally aware of the world around him. Joe Horn had taught him the necessity of being alert.

"I freed you from Sally. Now you're mine to use as I see fit. My prize," he growled. "And I'll use you as long as I like."

Sarah arched herself against him. His claim on her body sent shivers through her. She moaned, again. Without a thought for Joe Horn.

\* \* \*

Horn sat cross-legged in the lee of a thick tree, watching the moon shadows play across the field before him, wondering if he should chance the abandoned barn. Stark black lines defined its shape in the night, making it seem more like a silent, tense living thing than a lifeless wreck.

*Classic death trap, but I smell rain.* He'd spent enough nights sitting in a downpour that he really didn't want to repeat the experience if it could be avoided.

Horn never slept, but he needed rest, and warm rain or no he wouldn't get a lot if he spent the night getting soaked. Age had something to do with that, of course.

The rain came softly, the way evening rain does, a faint patter washing across the field like a million tiny feet. He sighed, giving in to common sense. He'd watched the barn for an hour, and knew it had to be empty. Not even Muck Drippy Thing could fool his sense of danger that long.

The big, rotted door shuddered and squealed and rolled aside a few feet. He stepped inside as the first big drops plopped on the loamy earth.

The darkness did not confound him. He waited patiently, letting it recede before his better than average night vision, until he could discern the cavernous whole.

Rotted straw and pieces of wood lay strewn about the cracked concrete floor. The loft had collapsed years ago, leaving a slanted wreck of timbers on one side. A door similar to the one he had just used stood open a crack on the far side of the empty room. As the rain increased to a pounding storm the air began to stir, moving sluggishly, like warm fog.

Single story rooms for feed and tack flanked the two-story main room. The feed room lay empty. In the tack room the remains of a halter hung from a sturdy hook. In one corner sat a scarred desk and a broken swivel chair. He watched a black widow creep across the stained surface of the desk. Broken windows and empty doorways gaped open to the outside.

The rain drummed steadily on the metal roof, an almost hypnotic rhythm. Water dripped from various holes, splattering hollowly on the cool concrete. He sensed rather than felt the slow tumbling of humid air set in motion by the storm.

\* \* \*

Thunder rumbled across the sky, sounding like Raphael's voice. Sarah moaned again as Raphael continued to move slowly inside her, letting her feel the full length of his cock slide in and out of her, teasing her with it, making her tremble with pleasure.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes. I love you, Raphael. I love your cock. I love the way you control me. God, fuck me like this all night."

Now she thought of Joe, after the searing intensity of her initial sexual hunger had passed. *I love Raphael with the depths of my heart, but I wish Joe were here, watching, getting hard, wanting me.*

She wished she could be two women, able to be slave to both of them at once. "Don't stop, Raphael! Please! I want more!"

*Joe would smile at her shameless begging.* The thought filled Raphael with pain, though he knew Joe would understand.

Around them, Raphael felt the aura of change, like static electricity in the air. *This place -- power lurks everywhere --*

Sarah's savage hunger renewed, generating within her an energy that seemed in tune with the electric tension in the air, building into a humming power that threatened to burst her apart. She cast it out unknowingly, a part of her becoming disembodied, as though she had been transported by the intensity of her orgasms.

Raphael felt it, too. On the edge of orgasm, fear stabbed at him. *Others will know.* But he decided he didn't care. For this woman he would fight the spawn of hell. He thrust harder.

Sarah came again, arching herself against Raphael, lifting them both off the grass, feeling the length of his thick cock buried deep in her cunt, feeling it claim her as she cried out her surrender and her triumph, sending her essence into the night.

\* \* \*

Horn sensed a change in the air, in the way it moved. Swirling now, rather than a slow, formless tumble, moving in an ever-tightening circle, with purpose.

He waited, watching not the space before him, but the doorway to the tack room. His eyes, as good as a cat's, saw the small creature scramble across the floor. The black widow.

The swirling mass of hot, humid air coalesced into formless mist.

In a second, the spider found its place beneath the mist, which now seemed to sharpen into a narrow, spinning funnel. The funnel reached down, sucked up the spider like a vacuum cleaner, shredding it microscopically, blending spider guts with water droplets and fear and lust, spinning tighter and faster, standing up and hissing as it became a narrow, solid snake reaching to the forty-foot ceiling.

Motion became fact. The column of power slowly collapsed, broadening, falling into place. The shape blossomed into a globular form with a dozen appendages, a spider from a madman's nightmare, pale eyes glowing yellow.

*I should have known something like this would happen,* Horn thought as he raced for the door. It screeched an inch and wouldn't budge. No great surprise.

*Joeeey...*

\* \* \*

Sarah lay sweaty and gasping on the grass. Raphael stared down at her, momentarily lost in the haze of lust and love that she exuded like musk. He lowered himself beside her, rolling onto his back and wrapping her close. He stared at the sky as the warm rain began to fall.

"We'll get wet," whispered Sarah, not moving.

Raphael made a dismissive sound. "Feels good." Their clothes were piled beside the tree, more or less sheltered by its spreading branches. The rumble of thunder sounded far off. No need to move yet.

Sarah smiled, kissing his chest. She reached down and wrapped her fingers around his still firm cock. "I love you."

"Speakin' to me or my cock?" he rumbled, chuckling.

"Both," she said. "How long until dawn?"



“‘Bout an hour, maybe hour and a half.” They needed to get moving, find a place to eat, maybe get cleaned up. No time to get a room at a motel, as appealing as a shower and six hours’ sleep sounded right now. The urgency of finding Joe and -- whatever it was they needed to find -- gnawed at him.

“What happened?” asked Sarah, thinking of what she had done in the midst of her carnal surrender.

“Not sure. This place is strange. Never felt anything like it. Power hangs in the air like smoke.” Raphael shrugged. “Toto, I don’t think we’re in San Diego anymore.”

Her wide eyes searched his. “I guess not. You made me think of Joe. I wanted him to be with us, so bad, I think I -- manifested something.” She spoke with a calm certitude that would have been impossible a year ago. But she had learned a lot since then.

Raphael smiled. “Let’s just hope it don’t hit an innocent bystander.”

Sarah choked with laughter in spite of herself then raked her nails across Raphael’s chest in revenge.

\* \* \*

Horn didn’t turn to face his death, but instead dove to one side, tucking and rolling. Good thing. A tentacle as thick as his thigh struck the steel door hard enough to make it shudder.

He side-stepped behind a wooden support that shattered into kindling, then ran dodging from side to side across the cement floor as Muck Drippy snapped two more supports like twigs.

Horn skidded to a stop before the door on the opposite wall, identical to the first. It might work or it might not, but the precious seconds necessary to slide it open he did not have. Three more tentacles flew his way.

There was no way he could avoid them, and no time to dig into his jacket for one of his homemade thermite bombs.

Sarah appeared beside him. He saw her as plainly as if she were real, which he knew she could not be. But MD didn’t know that, and the tentacles went for her,

rending her image like wet tissue, striking the metal door with ear splitting *kawangs*. The rusted steel tore from its track and went tumbling out into the rain.

Lacking three of its supports, the rest of the hay-loft finally collapsed, sending rotted wood and several hundred pounds of rat and bird droppings cascading down onto MD.

Horn dug into his jacket, extracting a modified soda can. He popped the tab and threw it at MD as he leapt through the open doorway. He hit the soggy ground, splattering mud as he rolled and came up running. A wild tentacle flew into space six feet over his head, coincidental with a muffled *whoomp* and a wash of white heat.

The barn went up like old cardboard in a bonfire. Horn watched it from the middle of the county road. Nothing came out, which didn't mean anything, but he sensed the emanations of spectral agony, and bared his teeth in a savage grin.

"Eat shit, motherfucker," he whispered, knowing he hadn't killed MD, but he'd certainly caused it a world of hurt.

Joe still felt the faint, tingling presence he knew so well. Sarah. Closing his eyes, he savored it, gathered it inside, and then set it free into the night with a message of love.

With a sigh he set off down the road, thoroughly soaked, hoping the rain would wash off most of the mud.

\* \* \*

Lying in Raphael's arms, watching the sun peek over the trees, Sarah suddenly jumped as if shocked, feeling something go through her that lifted her heart and her soul into the clouds. "Joe!" She sat up looking around.

Raphael rose with her. "What? Where?" he shouted, glancing around and grabbing for his clothes.

Sarah stared dreamily into space. "Joe." She smiled, just the way she smiled when she'd been thoroughly fucked. "Joe."

Raphael watched her, bemused.

She blinked. "We'd better get going."

## Chapter Two

From his seat on the plastic-covered stool at the end of the red linoleum counter Horn eyed the girl in the parking lot. She looked lonely standing among the diesel rigs and pickups. He decided she might be about nineteen, technically a woman, but her small, slender frame, short, bristly brown hair and worn clothes made her look more like twelve.

The truck stop stood by itself on a piece of two-lane blacktop that stretched away through the Indiana corn fields, Terre Haute to Newberg, with stops in between.

He found it hard to look at the girl. Too much like another girl, a long time ago. The image of a small, wan face appeared in his mind. He tried to shut it out by closing his eyes, his inner eyes, against the trusting stare. No soap.

So he just dealt with it as best he could, which wasn't too good. It hurt a lot, thinking about that face, but in the end it was just something he had to do. Like a daily penance. A little salt for his wounds, a whip to scourge his worthless flesh.

He gritted his teeth until it passed. The place hummed with business and no one seemed to notice. The A/C rattled like an old man coughing up his lungs, but it worked. Horn washed down a chicken and mayonnaise sandwich with a sweaty glass of ice water.

Outside the sun beat down with searing heat and he knew the kid had to be dying. A beefy guy approached her and said something. She seemed to hunch in on herself. She shook her head. The beefy guy spoke again. She shook her head again, and started to move away. The beefy guy gave up, tossed off a parting comment that made her close her eyes as he left. She looked pretty small and frail, right then.

So this was the stalker.

She didn't look very lethal.

*Fuck that* said the Beast.

Horn thought he'd glimpsed her a time or two, a mile back, barely discernable, when the road had been flat and straight and the shadows of overhanging trees did not hide her from view. But he could never be sure. At that distance, she could have been Muck Drippy.

Muck Drippy could show up again anywhere, anytime. He might be back there, somewhere, right now. Or maybe up ahead, behind a thick old elm by the road. Or sitting in the deep shadows of a crumbling farmhouse, waiting for nightfall, the blanket of darkness that would cover him as he shambled along the dark road that led him to Horn. Always to Horn.

Horn finished his sandwich and ordered one to go. Got a bottle of Crystal Flume Spring Water from the glass front refrigerated case and stepped out into the sodden heat, shading his eyes as he scanned the now empty lot.

Out on the road he saw her sitting under a broad-branched tree at the edge of a field, hugging her knees, big eyes just visible. A car rushed by and the breeze from it rustled his graying hair. He held up the sandwich. "Chicken with mayo."

She stared at him for ten seconds. Slowly, she uncoiled herself and approached. Five three, maybe ninety-five pounds. Not so much skinny as lean. T-shirt and torn jeans. Mickey Mouse watch on her wrist, broken unless it was set for Tokyo time.

"So what's your problem?" she asked, grabbing the sandwich and commencing to destroy it, not sounding like she cared one little teensy fucking bit.

He said nothing. They walked as she ate. Heat radiated from the blacktop, seared Horn's feet through the soles of his beat-up running shoes. He breathed the scent of sun-burnt grass and cool shade. Of damp dirt covered with decayed leaves and lazy flowers that drooped in the heat.

His joints ached.

He handed her the water. She gulped down about half of it all at once. From the corner of her eye, she watched him, waiting.

"What problem," he asked, "aside from finding a tailor who understands my eclectic taste?"

She stuck out her tongue. "I meant, what's bothering you?"

"You're a shrink? Or just a guilt-ridden limp-wristed liberal?"

She just stared, which felt a little unnerving coming from someone so young.

*Technically an adult, Horn, even if you could be her fucking grandpa...* Finally, he answered his own question, "Trying to regain my innocence. What's it to you?"

She grimaced. "Just curious," she said in a voice muffled by whole wheat and fowl.

"Is that why you've been following me? Curiosity?"

She ignored the question, finished off the water, sighed with moderate contentment. "That was good."

"You're welcome," he said. He wore a green, sweat-splotched T-shirt and baggy green pants, Army surplus chic, the new fashion statement among the rich and homeless. Carried a heavy green field jacket over one shoulder. The sweat made a wide patch down his back where the jacket hung. "Get rained on last night?"

She looked him up and down, as though grading him on his sense of style. "Yeah. No thanks for asking. I guess you thought a lot about that, holed up in your room at the Ritz, screwing your whore of the week, huh?"

"I didn't think you were close enough to hear."

She snorted. "Bitch made enough noise to wake the dead."

He frowned and glanced at her, not liking where this seemed to be going. And the hyperbolic commentary reminded him of how close he had come to real death.

"Bet you think you're mister super stud, right? You're probably thinking I'll drop my pants because I want to show you how much a woman I can be, huh?"

"Oh, yeah," he said, watching another car as it passed.

"C'mon, you'd do me if I offered. Admit it."

Her face looked expectant and dead at the same time. Like *I've been here many times and there's nothing you can say or do that I haven't had done to me...*

"OK. But you're a little butch for my taste. And frankly I like women with bigger tits."

She raised a fairly elegant eyebrow. "You just met me and you're pegging me as a dyke?" She seemed willing to let the tit remark pass.

"Either that, or I'm older than I thought."

She didn't sound convinced. "That, too. Anyway, I know your type. A cunt's a cunt."

"Which explains your decision to hang out with me." He frowned, thinking he ought to give her an earful about her language. Then he realized the truth in what she said. Maybe for reasons she didn't understand, but that didn't make it less true. "That guy back there give you a hard time?"

"No." She paused. "No more than I could handle." Her voice had a little catch. "You can mind your own business, y'know. That why you gave me the sandwich? Feeling sorry for the poor little hooker?"

She was too young for this. *Yeah, right. Jesus, Horn, no one's the right age to be treated like an inflatable sex toy.* "Yeah," he said absently. "You know, you could be a little nicer and I might not try to take advantage of it."

"Why should I?"

"No reason," he said, sighing.

She shrugged. "So who was she?"

"She who?"

"The little girl who made you cry." She watched him for a reaction. Like, this is a game I play, can you figure it out?

Horn felt the fear blossom in his gut, sudden and real. He stopped and turned to look at her, and stood very still. *How could she possibly have known?* His hands trembled a little as the edges stiffened reflexively.

She had no idea how close death loomed.

"I don't really want to talk about that right now," he said in a quiet, controlled voice.

"Oh. Sorry." Her eyes told him maybe she really did know how close she had been. To death.

Horn continued walking, still tense, but gradually finding that peaceful place where his power resided. The place he needed to be if it became necessary to commit violence.

Dust rose in the distance. The faint diesel growl of a tractor drifted on the thick, hot air, amid the strong smells of old wheat and manure.

He glimpsed movement from the corner of his eye, off the road, in a little patch of woods. An amorphous, flitting shape. Something brushed his mind, like a gossamer strand.

*Joeeeyy...*

His heart pounded and sweat ran down his face.

One of Them. The Goop Gang. The Slime Squad. The ones who laughed softly in the night and sucked on your fear like honey when they called your name.

They were like the Truth. The truth could be seen in the corner of the eye, but no one wanted to admit it.

Usually they just came and went like this, buzzards cruising in the distance. Sometimes one of them dropped in for a bite. Horn had a talent, developed over time, to sense them. Like an old hound sniffing up a trail. He supposed he ought to be glad -- his talent had saved his sorry ass more than once -- but he couldn't help thinking that explained why the Goopy Guys were always after him. Like he had accidentally learned their secret handshake or something, and now they had to kill him.

"Hey." Her eyes widened and she backed away. "Hey --"

Not from him. She didn't see him. She saw something else, and it scared the living shit out of her.

Horn looked around, the way he always did. Had she sensed it? Not impossible, he knew. "Nothing to worry about." Her startled, almost frantic look told him otherwise.

He'd had enough practice with this sort of thing to know that the presence he'd just sensed did not really sense him, or her. It had other things to do right now, arcane, slimy things. Pity the soul of whatever it hunted...

She stood ten feet away. Her eyes returned to here and now.

Horn watched her carefully.

She blinked. Her face had drained of color. "Can we go now?" she whispered.

They walked in silence for a bit.

"You do that often?" he asked at last. His voice, he suspected, carried some tension.

"Do what?" she said carefully, not looking at him.

"That mind reading crap," he said in a harsher voice than he intended.

She looked innocent. "Crap?"

"You know what I mean. Scare the living shit out of people? I'll bet you're Miss Popularity at school."

Her lips twisted in a parody of a smile. "First off, I'm nineteen, going on twenty, and I've been out of school for three years."

"Dropout?" he asked partly to get a rise out of her. Petty, but he didn't like being scared.

She smiled prettily. "Why, no. I graduated early. Because I'm too fucking smart to waste my time listening to a bunch of morons, thanks for asking." Then she said, "They all treated me like a freak."

"No college? You're so sharp, you could snag a scholarship."

"My folks weren't poor enough, and the gummint only got money for po' folks. Meaning, they're not technically poor, just too poor to afford to write a twenty-thousand-dollar check every year. Like about eighty percent of the population of this country."

"So you're a stinking liberal after all?"



Her eyes narrowed. "Like you care." Then, "No, not often. Only when it's strong. Or -- really emotional. Not that often. I actually don't like fucking around in people's heads."

He considered that. She wanted him to know that she had in fact picked up something from him. "So what do your folks think about this Kerouac road trip?"

"Nothing. They're dead," she said in a flat voice that sucked all the charm out of the air.

"I'm sorry."

"Really."

"Really. Being alone sucks. Trust me on that one. No family at all?"

She shrugged. "Foster parents, but I'm old enough to be on my own, and they have four kids who aren't."

"So, what are you doing out here when you should be helping out at home?"

She snorted. "Like a good little woman?" She stared straight ahead for a full minute.

Horn waited with the patience only age can bring.

"You're right. I'm gay. My folks -- the foster parents -- don't get it. My foster father actually hit me when I told him." She noted his look. "Yeah, pretty medieval. But that's life in the Bible belt." She paused again. "He apologized, and I think he was really sorry, but he still doesn't get it. I don't hate them. People are too complex to hate for simple reasons. They're decent people. I left because they're not ready to accept me for what I am. That's all."

*I don't think so, sweetheart.* There was something else. Horn knew it like he knew MD was out there somewhere. But he let it lie for now. "That doesn't really answer my question."

Her sudden smile dripped sarcasm. "You mean, why am I out here on the road, keeping company with a smelly old pervert?"

He winced. "More or less. So, I assume you understand the dangers of hanging out with smelly old perverts."

"Yeah. Fleas."

The road ran straight and empty, except for the occasional pickup, rusty and dusty, rattling by; or a semi, rumbling, snorting, its throaty roar falling away into the flat distance, leaving swirling diesel fumes and dead grass.

Horn became peripherally aware of an oncoming speck that resolved itself into an automotive shape.

A poster on a tree announced that one Julia Fraser desired election to the position of Third District Probate Judge. Probate made him think of death. *OK, a lot of things make me think about death. You try living all day, every day, with The Thing in the Corner breathing bile in your face and see how it makes you feel.*

Horn noted the unique color scheme and the high rate of speed. The black-and-white whipped past, doing about eighty. The lights came on, flashing red, but no siren. Then the squeal of tires, flying gravel from the sliding one eighty, burning rubber coming back.

The kid muttered, "Shit," and took off like a rabbit. She jumped a drainage ditch, headed toward amber waves of grain.

The car skidded to a stop and the door flew open. The driver stepped out, pistol in hand. Took a bead and let go. Simultaneously with the flat, lethal crack, the kid dropped like a stone.

The young fellow, who stood tall and narrow, wearing a white Stetson and aviator shades, braced his .357 semi-auto hand cannon on the door, aiming it at Horn's midsection.

Horn stood still, waiting, and praying that the kid was either dead or just winged slightly, because the .357 probably had wad cutters capable of shredding her internal organs like wet newspaper.

Stetson's Indiana drawl lacked neighborly sensibilities. "On the ground! Face down! Hands on your head!"

Horn complied and went face down in the gravel by the side of the road. He waited while Stetson made two or three dumb ass mistakes, like placing the gun barrel

against Horn's head as he patted him down with the other hand, thereby cuing him to the exact location of the weapon and additionally signaling that the wielder was close enough to attack, as well as being bent over and therefore off balance.

But Horn didn't take advantage, because while he had a feeling he could have taken Stetson with one hand stuck up his ass, he didn't know if the girl had taken a bullet through her torso, and even if she hadn't, the way she went down meant she probably couldn't walk. Horn had done a lot of bad things in his life, but leaving that girl behind to the tender mercies of this loon was not going to be one of them. Then the point became somewhat moot.

"Shit! Motherfucker! Shit! Shit! Shit!"

## Chapter Three

Raphael tensed, dropping into the brush by the side of the road. Sarah joined him. A moment later the black and white roared past, kicking up pebbles and dust.

They rose. The morning heat poured out of the sky like a sauna. Indiana in July did not inspire thoughts of migrating from the coast. Sarah glanced at Raphael. "What was that all about?"

He shrugged. "Bad vibes. I got the feeling he was looking for someone, and it might not be us, but it might not matter."

Sarah thought about that. "You mean, like a predator?"

Raphael nodded.

An hour later they came to a truck stop, busy with big rigs and heavy with diesel fumes. They sat at the cracked linoleum counter and ordered sandwiches and water. Sarah emptied one glass and motioned for another. As she waited, she stared out the window into the parking lot.

She blinked, unsure of her eyes. A figure seemed to waver outside, like a mirage. It never quite coalesced. She sat very still. One hand gripped Raphael's arm like a vice.

He turned and followed her gaze. "What?"

"It's Joe!" As she watched, she saw the hazy figure depart. She caught her breath as she saw a shadowy form appear from the left, where the parking lot ended in a dense copse of trees. The form flowed across the lot, following where the image of Joe had gone.

She shook her head, trembling. "Raphael --"

He put his large, calming hand on her arm. "You saw him?"

"And something else," she said. "Formless. A shadow." She turned to him. "He's in horrible danger."

Raphael's face split with a sudden grin. "Yeah. Like we didn't know that already."

She smiled and closed her eyes, leaning against his shoulder. A single sob shook her. "OK. I know you're right. And Joe can handle almost anything. But..."

Raphael nodded. "I know. You just had a vision. Doesn't happen very often. I expect you have a connection with him that's stronger than either of you know."

"He was here, Raphael. In this place. Something happened and he left -- with someone..."

Raphael nodded again. "Recent. Maybe less than a day."

"Hardly an hour," Sarah said with grim certainty. She stood up, quivering with impatience. "We've got to get moving."

Raphael paid for the meal. As they left he noticed a figure in the back of the diner. A waitress in jeans and a T-shirt, well built, dark-haired, getting a lot of stares. The waitress turned her head and her eyes went through him like ice.

She smiled.

Out in the lot, the heat took their breath away. Sarah looked at Raphael. "What happened?"

"Sally."

Sarah shrugged. "She's been after Joe for years. Speaking of predators. He seems to be able to handle *her*." She smiled slightly at that.

Raphael seemed uneasy nonetheless. "She's in this for more than Joe's cock. Or his soul. Whichever."

"We need a ride," Sarah said, popping two buttons on her blouse, exposing a noticeable amount of cleavage. Raphael smiled.

They bummed a ride with a burly middle-aged trucker driving a rig east to Columbus. He didn't look happy with Raphael, but Sarah sitting between them and rubbing her shapely thigh against him seemed to make up for that.

Said his name was Mitch. "Don't normally like to pick up riders, but I got a feel for people, and you two look OK." He stole open glances at Sarah's liberally exposed

breasts. "Been on the road a long time. Met a lot of people. Got robbed once, but that's about all. Most are like you two, just tryin' to get someplace. Martha used to say I ought'n trust people so much, but I been around enough I can usually figure when to keep on goin'. Lucky, I guess."

Sarah told him the truth. "We're looking for a man. Lean and kind of brooding. Dark hair. Ragged looking, but not scary, you know?"

Mitch furrowed his brow. "Well now, I come in last night and caught breakfast this morning, and I guess I seen about fifty lean and ragged guys with dark hair." He grinned at his wit.

Then he looked somber for a moment, as the rig rumbled along the highway. The road ran straight and true through a tunnel of dark woods on either side, the dim shade offering nothing in the way of respite from the leaden heat.

"Yeah." He glanced sideways at Sarah, for once not ogling her tits. "Hungry looking guy. Maybe forty. I spent a year in Iraq, the first time around, you understand, saw some of the Special Forces guys, come into our base after bein' out in the desert for about six months, had the same look. Not exactly haunted. More like, really, really on edge. You felt like if you said hi they'd either jump six feet or blow you away. Or both. The guy I saw this mornin' had the same look."

"Yes!" Sarah turned in her seat, intent. "That's him!"

Mitch glanced at her, her cleavage, the road, then over at Raphael. "What'd he do?"

"Not sure," said Raphael. "Likely getting himself into some kind of trouble, though."

Mitch nodded. "Those guys, they could be real good fellas, but there was somethin' about 'em. Like gettin' into bad places was in their blood. That's why they went into Special Ops." He shrugged. "You sure you want to find this guy?"

Before either of them could respond, Mitch tapped the air brakes. Glimpsing a figure in the middle of the open asphalt, he leaned on the air horn, then the brakes,

cursing, but the figure held its ground. As Sarah tensed, Raphael's gaze flicked from one side to the other. He saw flitting shapes in the trees.

They hurtled toward the figure in the road, standing tall and spectral, garbed in a long coat and a slouch hat, totally out of style and hideously hot on a day like this.

The coat resolved into rags, the hat became a hood.

"Sarah!" Raphael shouted.

Sarah reacted, shifting her weight and stomping her foot on the accelerator even as Mitch's face broke into a look of spreading alarm.

"Don't stop!" yelled Sarah. "Keep going!"

"But --" Mitch sputtered. "What --" He grabbed Sarah's leg and tried to move her foot from the pedal as the diesel surged. Momentarily his eyes left the road.

"Look!" Sarah screamed, pointing ahead.

The skeletal specter of death loomed up over the truck, arms spread wide, the body within its ragged covering dissolving into a dark fog, opening before them like a tunnel to Hell.

"Faster!" shouted Raphael. His face became set in fierce concentration.

Mitch glanced up and opened his mouth to scream. Simultaneously, he stomped down hard on the accelerator. Then he screamed as they drove into the specter.

The dark mist enveloped the rig, not dissipating but instead stretching across the hood. They were thrown forward as the rig suddenly slowed. The tires screeched and smoked, and the trailer began to jackknife. Darkness enclosed them.

From either side hands reached out, scraping along the hood, clawing at the metal, leaving furrows. Faces appeared, hideous and vacant, with cavernous maws. Mitch screamed and leaned away, hitting the horn again and again. The glass on his side shattered and a clawed hand swiped at the space where his head had been. Sarah reached across and struck it with the heel of her hand, screaming. Something solid crunched and the hand disappeared.

A body thumped onto the hood. Black, scabrous, scrabbling like a four-legged spider, it launched itself at the windshield. The glass cracked and spider-webbed, effectively blinding them.

Raphael hunched down and kicked out with his powerful legs, punching out the remains of the windshield.

A foul wind buffeted them. The creature reached inside, swiping with sickle claws. Sarah blocked and struck with lightning speed, breaking its limbs like sticks. It screamed and fell back. Raphael lunged forward, out on the hood, and knocked it aside.

Mitch kept the pedal down and the engine screamed as the tires smoked. They heard scrabbling sounds all around the truck as things tried to climb on.

Mitch slammed the door open, dislodging a hanging creature. From behind the cab a long black arm snaked around his neck.

Sarah swung over his body and kicked out with both feet. She connected, knocking the creature off. As it fell it grabbed her leg and dragged her out of the cab.

Mitch held onto the steering wheel and kept his foot on the pedal. With his free hand he grabbed Sarah and they locked forearms.

The truck continued to grind its way forward. Raphael growled something unintelligible. Sarah struck away grasping hands. The creature that held her leg hauled itself up toward her. She bunched her free leg and kicked out, smashing its face. It fell away, and she swung forward onto the wide step below the door of the cab.

Something caromed off the door, slamming it against her and breaking her grip on Mitch's forearm. As she fell she lashed out with hands and feet, landing hard on the soft dirt by the road, rolling and then exploding upward in a whirl of frenzied strikes. Bodies crunched and fell.

The rig had slowed to a hard run. It slid by her, invisible forces slowing it even more. She pivoted and ran for the open cab. Something tripped her and she stumbled. The force holding the truck dissipated like the mist it resembled, and the truck leapt forward.

Sarah gasped, regained her feet and raced for the open door.



A ghoul blocked her way. Rotted skin hung from its skeletal remains, reminding her of her aversion to all things scummy, and she flinched inwardly. Then she screamed and ran through it, extending her arms and simply throwing it out of her way. Tendrils of rotting flesh and slimy excrement whipped at her face, making her gag, but she burst through.

As the truck lurched forward, picking up speed, she leaped for the door and grasped the edge of the opening, hauling herself inside, squirming across Mitch's lap.

He shouted in fear then realized what had happened and dragged her into the cab as the truck hurtled into daylight.

They careened along the left side of the road, edging into the drainage ditch. Mitch spun the wheel. The rig swerved back across the road, dragging the trailer sideways through the ditch. Mitch gunned the engine and the big tires spun on the edge of the road, and the trailer lurched out of the ditch. They shot onto the asphalt.

An oncoming car blared its horn and swung wide, skidding as it slid past. Mitch fought the rig back into their lane.

Raphael rolled down the window and leaned out, looking back.

"Are they following?" Mitch shouted in a trembling voice.

Raphael swung back inside, tight lipped. He shook his head.

Sarah looked at him. "That car --"

Mitch looked ashen. "We gotta stop and go back --"

Raphael reached across and touched his arm. Blood flowed from a deep gash. Scratches and cuts crisscrossed Mitch's neck and face. His shirt had been almost torn from his body. "No. It's too late."

They rode in silence for a time, keeping the speed below thirty in view of the lack of a windshield, until Raphael signaled that Mitch should pull over.

They slowly dismounted from the cab. Scratches and gouges covered the hood. Something dark and wet smeared the scarred metal. Along the sides of the trailer, similar marks could be seen.

While Sarah walked around the rig to make sure nothing had managed to hitch a ride, Raphael tended Mitch's wounds. The trucker sat on the bumper, shaking, saying nothing. His eyes stared ahead but Raphael could tell they saw what lay behind them.

Raphael mumbled something under his breath, as he held his hands over the worst of the cuts, and Mitch suddenly winced. When he looked down, the cuts had been healed.

Raphael smiled weakly, his face registering fatigue.

"Them people..." Mitch's voice broke.

Raphael put an arm around him. Mitch leaned against his shoulder and cried.

After a minute he straightened, looking embarrassed. "Sorry," he croaked. "Ain't done that since Martha died. Five years..." His voice trailed off. "You think there's a -- better place? After this."

Raphael stared at him solemnly. Then he grinned and shrugged. "Hope so."

Mitch grinned, too, fighting back the pain.

"Looks clear," Sarah reported, standing to one side. "Two of your tires are slashed."

Mitch nodded. "That's why God made eighteen wheelers." He smiled at her. "Where to now?" he asked.

Raphael grew solemn again. "We should leave you now. You're probably safe, but certainly not for long if you stay with us."

Mitch shook his head. "Maybe you could let me in on what's really goin' on here."

Raphael glanced at Sarah. "We're trying to stop a cataclysmic event."

Mitch stared at both of them. "And this would involve..."

"More of what you just saw back there," Raphael said. "A lot more."

Mitch sighed. "And what exactly was that?" He looked down at his ruined shirt and then at the damage to his rig.

"Nothing you can call real," said Sarah. "I didn't believe in monsters and magic either, until recently. Both exist. There's a rift --"

"A tear in the fabric of reality," explained Raphael. "Things are getting through from somewhere else, to here. They have been for a while, but something bad has been calling them, and they're coming in greater numbers. We have to find the rift and close it."

Mitch started to say something, then closed his mouth. "Yeah, that's a lot to swallow. I guess if I hadn't just had my face rubbed in it I'd think you were nuts." He fell silent for another moment then spoke. "Listen, son, you and this girl just opened my eyes to somethin' that ain't goin' away. Ever. So, I guess you can say I'll slow you down, and for sure I ain't twenty-five no more, but you can't leave me with somethin' like *this is dangerous so you better stay behind*. Besides. Somethin' tells me whatever you're lookin' for is right up ahead." He gestured with his head toward the weather-beaten sign that said "Homer 10 miles."

## Chapter Four

Stetson missed her by a foot, but the sound of the shot startled her and she tripped and fell over a rotted log, twisting her ankle. She was in a lot of pain, but didn't say a word, just gritted her teeth and looked daggers at Stetson as he trussed her hands behind her back with a length of rope from the trunk of the cruiser.

"What's her crime?" Horn gasped as Stetson jacked him upright, using the cuffs as a convenient handle that threatened to tear Horn's arms out of their sockets.

"Hangin' out with assholes." Stetson chuckled. "Somebody called her in for soliciting."

Horn remembered the disgruntled fellow in the parking lot. He appreciated a civic-minded attitude. "I guess that explains the use of deadly force."

"Resistin' arrest usually justifies any force."

Horn nodded toward the kid. "She's hurt."

Stetson pushed him toward the car. "Good for me. Less chance she'll run off."

"She's limping like her ankle might be broken. If it is, she'll fester and get gangrene in a day and a half without medical attention."

"Oh, right, doctor dip-shit," Stetson chuckled at his own remarkable wit, but he hesitated. He pushed Horn back down on the ground. "Sit with yer legs crossed." First halfway intelligent move he'd made. Stetson turned to the kid and searched her first, a little too carefully.

She didn't say anything, not even when his hands wandered over her smallish breasts and gave a couple of squeezes.

Horn watched, carefully in control.

Stetson found a ten stuffed in her hip pocket, grunted, slipped it into his own. Then he squatted and rolled up her pant leg. He snorted and stood. "Ain't even bruised.

Come on," he said to the kid, shoving her ahead of him as he did the jacking up thing on Horn again.

Horn knew Stetson's type. Insecure manhood, propped up with the lethal phallic symbol. Needed to prove he was better than other men, that he could cop a feel on the little broad with the perp watching. *I can have it and you can't.*

Stetson shoved him into the back seat, banging his head against the edge of the roof. Stuffed the kid in beside him. She scooted away, as far as possible from Horn, next to the window.

"Oh, yeah," Stetson said in a bored voice as he slid into the front seat. He turned and faced Horn through the mesh screen that separated them. "I almost forgot. You're under arrest for the murder of Alice Murdock. I'm supposed to read you your rights, but I figure since your rap sheet says you been arrested three or four times, you probably already know 'em pretty well." He nodded at the kid. "This little piece here is assumed to be your accomplice. Tell her all about her rights if you like." He turned back and started the motor, gunned it and took off, muttering, "Freakin' slimeball..."

\* \* \*

Down at the station, Horn and the man behind the desk gave each other the Stone Face Stare. They were both pretty good at it.

"Horn."

"Fred." *One thing about us tough guys, we don't waste words.* The brass nameplate on the large oak desk said Sheriff Frederick D. Tate. But Horn already knew that.

The kid sat in a chair, the hurt leg propped on another chair, looking back and forth between them. "Shit, you know this creep?"

Horn almost smiled, because it wasn't clear which creep she meant.

Fred didn't smile. "Shut up, missy, an' watch your mouth. We'll get to you in a minute." He turned back to Horn. His eyes were flint. "Been a while." He leaned back, and his chair squeaked. Sweat gleamed on his balding scalp. The county didn't spring for A/C. Sheriff Tate was supposed to be out on the road, defending the weak and killing the bad guys.

Fred appeared to be an older, leaner and, Horn expected, much tougher version of Deputy Stetson. The similarities were too numerous to be coincidental. Stetson's nametag was a subtle clue: TATE.

The summer sun had tanned Fred's sharp-featured face, except for the scar across the bridge of his nose. Horn remembered that scar from 'Nam. A small memento from a bad time. Knowing Fred, he got high on flashbacks.

"We won't get into our past acquaintance, Horn. Been a murder over in Tutridge and it was pretty gruesome. Place was full of prints, and the FBI computer put your name on some of 'em."

Fred consulted a sheet of paper. "Looks like you been picked up before. Seattle, Aggravated Assault. But the plaintiff disappeared, so the charges were dropped." Fred smiled. "But not before somebody took some prints and shot your mug. So the FBI sent us a nice little picture an' all. Just our luck that Sam here happened to see you on the road."

The plaintiff had been eaten, to be more precise, but Horn decided not to make a big deal out of it. "I'd guess he was actually looking for her --" nodding toward the kid.

She sat up straight. "I didn't do nothin'! Jeez, he's a killer? How the hell was I supposed to know? I never saw him --"

"Will you shut your face?" shouted Fred. "I said we'd get to you later." Then back to Horn. "Now why would he be lookin' for this little girl?"

Horn decided to humor him. "I'd say it's possible he ran across her earlier, maybe picked her up for vagrancy. You can spot a runaway pretty easy around here. Probably just wanted a lunchtime blow job, and when he didn't pay for it like he promised, maybe she managed to lift his wallet, and took what she figured she was worth. That's why he pulled the ten out of her pocket, claiming his loot. A lot of runaways don't have much self-esteem, and maybe she figured she wasn't worth very much. But she had her pride, and she took ten bucks, not a dime more, and left the rest." Horn paused and then said, without looking at Stetson, "Isn't that about right, son?"

Stetson opened his mouth to utter an elegant rebuttal, but all that came out was “Fuck...” so Horn knew he’d pegged it. Fred knew he knew.

And that ended the matter. No mention of the shooting. Forget that Stetson couldn’t hit his foot. If the kid had had real parents who had a real job between them, it would have resulted in a multi-million-dollar suit in about thirty seconds, with a seven-figure out of court settlement.

Runaways and vagrants don’t count.

On the desk, Horn saw a copy of the town gazette, couple of days old. Had a story about the opening of the new municipal holding facility, while the headline screamed MURDER. He’d never been able to determine if editors did this kind of thing on purpose.

Sub heading told of a middle-aged widow, hacked to pieces. Plenty of gory detail further down.

Horn reacted in stages. First the cold chill. Then the bright sadness of loss. Then hard, simmering anger, tempered with resignation. Alice Murdock had been a nice, somewhat reclusive woman of about fifty, who didn’t mind feeding a total stranger from nowhere, and Horn had liked her. She’d liked him, too. He’d left her standing at her door at six in the morning, wrapped in an old cotton robe, steaming coffee in one hand, faint smile on her weathered face. Scenes like that made him feel old and bad. *I’m an alley cat, with morals to match.*

But he hadn’t killed her.

Directly.

The paper said the gore went from one end of the old two-story house to the other. Top to bottom. Looked like animal sacrifice in the bargain. All the pets were dead. Three cats, he remembered. The big, fat one had insisted on getting into bed with them.

Muck Drippy, of course. Same as Seattle. And a few other places.

Horn could imagine just how gruesome it had been, slicing and dicing and then dragging the shredded corpse all over the house, dripping on the floor, wiping the

walls. Sucking the brains out of the skull with wet, slurping sounds. Playing a game, the Muck Drippy game. Horn had seen the results more than once.

Ugly thoughts of the dearly departed, but that's probably the way it had happened. If he survived this, he'd shed some tears for Alice. Another one they'd both have to answer for someday, he and MD.

The kid gave her name as Josephine Beauhamais. Horn raised one eyebrow. She'd used the name of Napoleon Bonaparte's mistress. Her cleverness went over Fred's head. "You don't look like no Josephine, honey," murmured Fred, glancing over the newspaper. "But I guess it don't matter too much."

No ID, about a buck twenty in loose change. And the broken Mickey Mouse watch. Stetson made a little pretense of taking her prints.

This was the old municipal holding facility. Small enough they had only one long hall and a dozen cells. But places like this little burg didn't have a lot of hardened criminals running around. They put the kid in the first cell next to the door. She flumped on the lower cot, pouting. "Geez Louise, I gotta stay in here with him?" She gave Horn a mean stare.

Fred sighed, and looked at Horn. "If there was other guys in here, we'd take you on over to the woman's jail tonight," he said. "As it is, we just got us the local axe murderer, and he's all the way down yonder." Nodding toward the end of the corridor. "And I'm pretty beat. We'll do it tomorrow. This is just temporary."

They stuck him in the last cell. The cell doors were all bars, nothing resembling privacy. Putting the kid in here with him probably broke a dozen civil liberties laws, but Horn had long ago learned to separate law from reality.

They finally found the K-Bar, hidden in the folds of the coat. Fred hefted the knife and Deputy Stetson turned a shade paler. Fred's look made it clear: *Jesus you idiot, you didn't even do a decent search?*

Stetson shuffled away, looking glum. Fred leaned against the cell and watched him go. "Damn boy's gonna get himself killed one o' these days." Frustrated dad, like



any other. Then, to Horn, sitting there like a lump on one of the lowers, "Didn't read you your rights did he?"

"Short version."

Fred nodded. No big deal. "You come a long way since 'Nam." His sarcasm went flat in the damp air.

Horn said, "You, too. I figured you'd be a county commissioner, or maybe state A.G. by now. Not a two-bit sheriff in a backwater ghost town."

Fred looked about the same, not an extra pound on him. A little less hair. Maybe a few extra deaths. He shrugged, just as though Horn's comment meant nothing at all. "Found my place. Got a decent job, raised a decent son. Makin' my contribution to society."

Not a riposte to Horn's little jab. Just a bland statement of what Fred considered the obvious. *I am a moral, upstanding person. You, who do not live like me, are therefore shit.*

"I don't glad hand all that well, just enough to get elected." Pause. "But I do get convictions."

Horn let that one drop into the empty space between them.

"We'll get you an attorney, sit down and have a little talk. That knife don't look so good, Horn. Lab tests will show if there's blood on it. Amazing how they can practically find individual molecules, tell you the victim's type, age and shoe size. Anyway, I know the DA real well, and I'm not saying you'll get preferential treatment or nothin', but he's been known to plea bargain a case on my say so. So, you got any idea what you want to say?"

Seeming to offer a chance to avoid what they both knew was coming. Horn had seen Fred at work in 'Nam.

"I didn't do it, Fred." For what it might be worth, every bit of nothing.

An election loomed, and the Murdock murder could be a real irritation if the opposition candidate made an issue out of it. Or, it could be a real boon to the man who nabbed the killer. Fred was smart enough to make sure the situation became whatever he needed it to be.

And Fred had a score to settle with Horn.

Fred's eyes went a little bit flatter. He waited a minute. Nothing else. He shrugged again. "Suit yourself."

Fred's footsteps, quiet on the concrete, slowly faded down the corridor.

## Chapter Five

"Do you know where you are?"

The silky voice made Sarah jump, even though she recognized it. A sensual thrill went through her. She turned to see Sally standing by the side of the road. Not nude this time. Clad in jeans and a tight T-shirt and looking like a thirty-five-year-old country girl who had learned too much about men.

Raphael barely acknowledged her presence.

Mitch, who had just begun to climb into the damaged cab, stopped and stared. Two stunning women in one day taxed his equanimity.

Sally eyed Mitch appreciatively, as a spider might appreciate a fly.

"Back off, Sally," Raphael ordered.

She grimaced. "My power here is -- limited, anyway."

Raphael smiled grimly. "You mean you can't kill people just for the hell of it?"

Her beautiful blue eyes flared. "I never kill for the hell of it. I kill for food. And lately I've been slowly starving, thank you for caring." She glanced at Mitch again.

They had traveled ten more miles, until they had passed the sign announcing their entrance into the town of Homer, population 2,345. An abandoned gas station marked the spot. Further on down the road lay scattered homes and a few commercial buildings that appeared to be abandoned as well.

Mitch looked grim. "Ain't nothin' in Homer except the dead and the dyin'. I usually take the route 14 bypass, but I guess I know where we gotta go." He shook his head. "Looks worse than usual. Don't remember this gas station even bein' here."

Raphael shrugged. "Probably wasn't." He gestured to Sally. "I think she knows why. We're not in the normal world anymore, are we?"

"You're not even in the Borderland," she said. "We're in Shadow now. Deep. When you went through the trap, even though it didn't stop you, you were diverted."

Raphael nodded.

Sarah watched Sally closely. Something about her seemed different. Softer maybe. *Not as fucking perfect.* "Why are you here?"

"I'll help you find Horn."

Raphael snorted in derision.

Sally narrowed her eyes. "I'm serious. I know where he is."

"Where!" Sarah leaned toward her.

Sally shook her head. "I can't say. Same as when I saw Horn last. This place has rules."

"Crap! Quit playing games!"

Mitch stood looking from one to the other. His brow furrowed and he crossed his arms as he stared at Sally.

Raphael held up one hand. "She's telling the truth."

Sally arched one eyebrow at Sarah. Sarah felt like sticking out her tongue.

"What can you tell us?" asked Raphael.

Sally shrugged. "I don't know. You have to ask. And you have to pay a price."

Sarah grimaced. "Oh, yeah. I bet."

Sally tossed her head. "Yeah. You bet."

Raphael spoke in a tired voice. "OK, is he in Homer?"

"First the price." Sally looked at Mitch. "One hour with him."

Mitch unfolded his arms. Sarah was pleased to note that he did not seem entirely happy with her pronouncement.

Raphael's face went blank. "Why not one of us?"

Sally smiled. "She bores me and you -- well, you and I know each other too well, I think."

*I bore you?* Sarah gritted her teeth against the need to slap Sally really hard. Then she realized her nipples were stiff. Her legs felt weak. Vivid images of what Sally had

done to her -- while in the guise of a man -- made her head swim. "As I recall, you did not act *bored* the last time we --"

Sally's look faltered for a second. Then she smiled. "I suppose you remember it differently than I do." She turned back to Mitch. "I'm a succubus," she said. "I will take from you whatever I can, including your soul." She looked him up and down. "I will not kill you unless you seek death in my arms. Many men have."

Raphael shrugged. "She has to speak the truth. There's usually a catch, but that may be a chance we have to take."

Mitch spoke up. "So you're sayin' if I... have sex with you, you'll tell these folks how to find their friend?"

Sally smiled happily. "Yes!"

Mitch looked at Raphael, then at Sarah. "Um, is this something you all think of as -- normal?"

Sarah arched one eyebrow. "Mitch, there's nothing about Sally that's normal. She is what she says she is."

Mitch's eyes narrowed, and Sarah had the sudden impression of a much more formidable man than she had first supposed. She also noted that his cock had hardened. Sally had that effect on men, she knew.

Mitch's hands opened and closed. Strong hands used to heavy labor, hauling boxes and tying them down... His barrel-chested torso remained scratched and battered, nearly bared by his shredded shirt. The image of him using those big hands to tie her to the trailer by the side of the road, digging his fingers into her ass and fucking her as cars drove past, made her quiver inside. She licked her lips and looked at Raphael, seeking something to steady herself. *Am I really such a slut?*

*Yes*, came the answer, not surprising her at all. She loved sex, especially sex where strong men used her like a toy and left her begging for more. In her life they had generally just left her, but she knew she had only her bad taste to blame for that. Mitch just happened to be the personification of one of her fantasies.

Mitch nodded slowly. "You gotta tell the truth, right?"

Sally smiled sweetly and nodded.

"So, you ain't gonna do anything that'll bring harm to my friends?"

"You've known them an hour and they're your friends?"

"Yeah," Mitch said. "They are. So answer the question."

Sally blinked as if unsure how to handle such a straightforward approach. She hesitated, as though considering the ramifications of her response. "I intend nothing that will bring harm to your friends."

Mitch shook his head. "What I meant was, this is a bargain. I'll go with you, but you gotta promise you won't do anything to bring harm to my friends."

Sally looked shocked. "Excuse me? You presume to bargain --"

"Listen, girl, we got a line on this guy Horn already. You want to help, that's fine. But right now about all you got going for you is a nice rack. Agreed or not?"

Sally actually quivered with indignation, and her eyes narrowed. But Sarah noticed that Sally seemed to be... impatient? *She hasn't fed in a long time. She's probably hungry beyond her normal tolerance. With her the line between sex and food is vague, but I'll bet she's aching to be fucked. Horn spoiled her.*

"OK. I promise to do nothing that will bring harm to your friends." Sally bit off the words. She turned and stalked off into the heavy brush by the side of the road.

Mitch glanced back at Raphael and Sarah. Raphael shrugged. Sarah nodded.

Mitch followed Sally.

\* \* \*

Within the enfolding shadow of the woods, Sally waited for Mitch.

Mitch looked around, then back the way he had come.

"We're safe here," said Sally impatiently. "We --"

Mitch grabbed her and hauled her close, breathing in the musk of her body.

Sally squirmed instinctively, but felt instantly aroused. *A mortal! Not even like Horn, and he arouses me so easily! I have truly been starved of late. I must take from him --*

But the thought dissolved under the pressure of Mitch's lips. His body covered hers, and the smell of his blood and sweat and pure masculinity overwhelmed her. His

hands caressed her crudely, with no attention to her, only to the satiation of his own hunger, long denied. Sally sensed the unleashing of his passion, banked for years since the death of his woman, the pain and anguish renewed along with the powerful hunger for pure sex.

Sally controlled others through their physical senses, including sexual hunger. But the power of Mitch's emotions blew through her like a tidal wave through a sand castle.

He pushed her back against a tree then stopped, holding himself in check by sheer will. "I think you want my cock as much as I want to ram it into you."

She tried to catch her breath. "You -- you wish!"

"Take off your clothes. Strip for me. Now."

She trembled with anger and fear at his command. Only Horn had ever treated her this way, and only after winning The Game. No other man had ever spoken to her like this and lived. Not in three thousand years.

For a brief moment something hung in the balance. Power? Life?

Sally realized she could not tell, and further realized she did not care.

She unbuttoned her blouse with trembling fingers. *Let him think he has me cowed. Let him think my nipples are long and hard on his account.* She opened her blouse, letting her breasts spill out. She wanted to make them firmer, the nipples larger, to further inflame his lust, but here she lacked the powers she wielded in the Borderland. She merely appeared to be a voluptuous woman of thirty-five, still fine looking and handsomely sensual, with curves to attract any man. But no more than that.

*As I once appeared, in Alexandria, so long ago. Before Akmet the Terrible did what he did and made me what I am. Too bad for Akmet.*

She dropped her jeans and stepped out of them, leaving herself nude for Mitch's inspection. She leaned back against the tree with her arms over her head, wrists crossed, the picture of seductive submission. A broken tree limb stood out above her and she grasped it, stretching her lithe body up on tiptoe.

Mitch's hands twitched. He watched her strip and stand nude up against the tree. *Christ, what a body!* Her pose taunted him, and he felt anger bubble up inside him. *Arrogant bitch. She thinks she can manipulate me.* He slowly raised his hands to touch her.

"Now you strip, too," Sally reminded him in a smoky voice.

Mitch caught the edge of hunger. "Shut up," he said. "I'm in charge. I'll say what happens."

Sally's lips curled in a snarl of anger.

Mitch reached out and pinched both distended nipples.

Sally gasped and threw her head back against the trunk of the tree, arching outward, grasping the jutting limb like a life preserver.

"See what I mean? You're gonna do what I say." He pinched her nipples again, then ran his hands over her, hard and possessive, telling her by his crude touch that he sought not her pleasure but his.

Only his hands, strong and callused, touched her. Sally's mind dissolved into simple hunger. She moaned, writhing under his touch, realizing vaguely that she moved her body at his will, just as he wished.

"You're sexy as hell, girl."

"I'm Sally!" she insisted, even though she hated the name Horn had given her. "Sally!"

"You're nothin' but a sexy girl to me," he growled, the heat in his voice betraying his need, but stimulating Sally's pleasure ten-fold.

"I'm not -- I'm not --" She lost her voice in a ragged cry. "Stroke me! My clit! Please!"

"You're not what? A sexy girl? Try again. Try saying you're my sexy toy. I always wanted a girl to tell me that. Say it."

Sally looked at the leaves above her and thrust her breasts out at him, wanting his lips on them, his teeth biting her nipples. She closed her eyes. "Yes. I'm your sexy toy. Yes."

He stroked her clit with one finger, gently at first, teasing.



Sally held on to the tree limb. "Ah! Your hands. Your hands..." She moaned. "Take me." She hadn't realized her hunger ran so deep. It must be the hunger. *I'll satisfy my need and then I'll be strong again.* "Take me, please!"

"Maybe," Mitch muttered. "Maybe not."

\* \* \*

Sarah gritted her teeth in frustration as Sally disappeared into the woods with Mitch. *If she had said she wanted to watch Mitch take me, I'd have done it in a heartbeat.*

"You're looking after Sally like you wanted to take her place." Raphael's voice had taken on a harder edge that sent chills down her spine. "Say what you want, woman."

She ripped open her blouse and skinned out of her pants, falling to her knees before him, nude and shaking with hunger. Death had come so close. So close. And then her remembrance of Sally, and the image of Mitch taking her...

"Please, Master, fuck me..." Raphael gripped her hair. The feel of his hand on her sent shivers through her and she closed her eyes. "Please!"

\* \* \*

"I can't stand it!" Sally moaned. "Please, take me." She knew her voice carried, and that Raphael and Sarah heard every word. *I don't care! I've never wanted a cock so badly! What is it about this man that makes me want to be his slave? He's meat! Nothing more! Meat!* But her mind could not encompass the thought of killing him, not now when she wanted him to fuck her, hard and carelessly, to punish her for being...

What?

Coherent thought faded as his teasing finger triggered a powerful orgasm. She cried out with unfettered lust, "Ah, more, more!"

He pulled the belt from his pants and used it to tie her wrists to the limb overhead. She watched with hungry eyes, blissfully happy.

*Happy? What is this? Happy? How can such a crude beast make me happy?*

Then, as he discarded his clothes like useless armor, revealing his strong body, middle-aged but still rugged and firm, with big shoulders and thick wrists and strong

hands, and a long thick throbbing cock, she spoke. "Please," she whimpered, staring at his cock. "Please."

Her voice could castrate a man, make him her slave, make him come at her whim. But now she sounded like a helpless girl trembling with anticipation before her lover's cock. Her eyes brimmed with tears as he became gentle, sliding his hands over her sensuous curves, saying "Mmmm" under his breath, letting his cock rub against her cunt.

"Please," she whispered with more urgency. "Take me." She breathed into his neck as he pressed his body against hers. She raised her legs, as easily as if they were weightless. She might not have all her power here, but she retained the strength of a gymnast, and her cunt opened to him as he thrust into her.

She cried then, real tears running down her face as his large hands cupped her ass and his beautiful cock thrust into her, triggering another orgasm, so sweet and powerful and long that she lost her voice entirely and simply thrust and thrust and thrust, feeling her heart burst with her aching need.

*What's happening to me?*

He kept thrusting, and she pushed her breasts out, grunting and moaning, and he took them into his mouth, one after the other, raking them with his teeth. She wanted them to be larger than they already were, just because he would surely like them that way, especially when he paused and whispered, "God, what tits."

She came again as he continued to make love to her, punishing her in a way she had never anticipated, not the harsh, angry fucking that Horn gave to her, but something far more powerful, a truly loving man who had been without a woman for far too long. A man who retained the presence of mind to know how to control her even in his unabated hunger. A man whose nature was gentle and loving even though his body understood the need for power and taking.

She cried out, helpless and full of joy, as he finally came, grunting harshly as if he had given up something instead of giving her the greatest gift of all, still reserved and cautious somehow.

*How well I know that feeling.* "Let me down," she said. "I will serve you again, in a different position."

He unwrapped the belt and lowered her to the ground.

"Sit here, against the tree." Her voice carried no tone of harsh insistence or imperiousness. She simply could not muster it.

"I ain't sure I got any more in me," he said.

She smiled and reached down and stroked his cock. "I am not totally without power here."

His cock became rigid, and he hissed with pleasure. His hands grasped her and he pulled her down as he sat against the tree.

She lowered herself onto his cock, quietly whimpering. "Ah, Mitch, oh, that feels magnificent."

She began to move on him. Her hands covered his on her breasts, squeezing and molding them. "Now you can watch me come." She moved her hips greedily, closing her eyes as his cock thrust into her.

*So hard and long and deep, I want him to own me!* She thrust her breasts into his mouth again, reveling in his domination of her, his control of her body.

*He conquered me entirely too easily. Perhaps this comes from losing some of my power.*

*I don't care.*

"You're gonna be my slave for a while, ain't you?"

"Yes," she said simply. As she made this pronouncement, the hunger she had felt, for death and blood, went out like a candle in a hurricane, leaving behind only the searing need to be fucked over and over and over. She gripped Mitch's meaty shoulders. "I love your cock, Mitch. Promise to fuck me many, many times with it. Please."

He grinned, mauling her breasts. "Maybe I will and maybe I won't, but if you beg real nice you might get it once in a while."

She moaned with mixed pain and pleasure so intense she came, gasping. *Make me beg! Make me crawl!* She screamed this time, and the next as well, not because she had

to, but because she wanted to. In the end she invoked the name she had forsworn so long ago. "Oh, God, Mitch! Yes! God, yes!"

When she had at last quieted and felt the unaccustomed fatigue and lassitude of total relaxation wash over her, he rolled over onto her. She wrapped her legs around him and held him with passionate strength. They lay together like that for a long time.

Mitch finally looked at his watch. "We gotta get back." He rose and brushed the dirt and twigs off his body, then quickly dressed. He stared at her as she lay unmoving, magnificently nude. *Guess we'll see what this really means.* "Follow me." He picked up her clothes and walked back toward the others.

Sally rose languidly and followed him, still nude.

When he got to the edge of the woods, he said, "Crawl."

She stood still for a moment, staring at him without blinking. Then she smiled and dropped to all fours, and slowly crawled after him out into the open grass beside the road.

Raphael stood beside the truck. Sarah knelt at his feet, as nude as Sally, her hair a mess. "We heard you," Sarah said. "Very inspiring."

Mitch admired Sarah openly, nodding. He looked at Raphael then glanced down at Sally, who knelt beside him. "Maybe this will work out OK."

Raphael smiled. "Maybe it will."

## Chapter Six

Horn stared at the wall. Not much else to do. Felt day slide away into dusk, then evening, then cool, silent night.

Leaning against the bars, he couldn't quite see the kid's cell. He wanted to say something to her, no idea what, just something to push away the loneliness he knew surrounded her right now.

The big door at the end creaked open, flooding the corridor with artificial light, casting Stetson's shadow across the floor, elongated like a wraith. A couple of snakeskin boot steps echoed in the cool, damp air.

Horn glimpsed his shadow leaning against the kid's cage.

The shadow moved, as Stetson unwrapped a pack of gum. Shoved a stick in his mouth, crumpled the wrapper, let it fall. Offered another stick through the bars. Pause. Nothing. Shrugged, stuck it back in his pocket. "So, how's the ankle?" His low voice still echoed in the hollow, concrete corridor.

No answer.

"Gettin' tired of bein' locked up? You know how you can get out."

"How?" Small dead voice.

Horn could sense the smile slowly etching its way across the narrow face.

"Oh, I don't know, but maybe if you exhibit what we call 'good behavior,' your upcoming sentence for solicitation might get commuted."

"You mean, if I fuck you?"

Horn liked her directness, but thought she really shouldn't say fuck so much.

Short chuckle. "Yeah. Somethin' like that."

"You mean, if I take off my clothes and spread my legs right here?"

"Mmmhmm." Pop, smack as he blew a bubble.

Pause. Horn waited. Stetson waited.

Finally, she said, "Sure." The word resonated with resignation.

Stetson's smile was probably ear to ear. "Good. Maybe one other thing."

Pause. "What?" Weary, but unsurprised.

Another chuckle. "Nothin' much. Just be ready to talk about where you been and what you seen the last couple of days. Maybe five minutes. Recorded right up there in the front office, and then you walk. That's all."

"So besides fucking you, I should say I saw this guy Horn at the Murdock house."

"Yeah."

"The night of the murder?"

Stetson thought about that for a second, which Horn thought probably short-circuited the majority of his brain cells. "Uh, maybe. Hafta think about it."

Meaning, ask Fred if they wanted her to lie that bad.

"OK." No hesitation. "You want it now or later?"

"Now'd be fine."

"You don't mind he's right down the hall?"

Pitching his voice to carry, Stetson drawled, "Hell no, honey, that's more or less the point."

Horn listened as Stetson got out his keys. They rattled, and the door rumbled open.

Rustle of clothing. "You gonna do it like that, pants on and all?" Sounding like she didn't care much.

No answer. More rustle, little chuckle.

Hiss of breath, then, "Ow! Jeez," then the sound of a slap, then another, and a deeper, softer sound, like a punch, and she whoofed.

"Is it worth ten bucks, bitch? Is it?" Another punch, or a kick, and she wheezed. *Crunch, bang* as he threw her against the bars, and she moaned. Then the sound of his zipper.

Rhythmic pumping. She didn't say anything. Not a word.

Horn glimpsed the shadowy image of little fists wrapped around the bars.

It went on for a while. Stetson liked to make it last.

"So is it worth ten bucks, bitch? *Is it?*"

The kid still didn't say anything.

Stetson finished, finally. Zipped up, breathing heavily. "You can still walk out of here," he gasped. Hell of a workout, beating the shit out of a defenseless kid. "You just remember what I said." He let himself out, eased the door shut, strode down the corridor, whistling a little tune.

Horn finally let go of the bars, un-cramping his hands a little at a time.

He heard her now. Finally. Hard, retching sounds as she puked into the open toilet, followed by little hurt sounds. Weeping, but trying not to let it out, not going to give anyone the satisfaction of knowing he had really hurt her.

After a while, Horn said, "Hey." It sounded small and strangled.

No answer.

He let it go. Probably didn't need the comfort of a disembodied voice belonging to an axe murderer.

Her small voice barely carried down to him. "I'm sorry."

"Why?"

Pause. "I was gonna leave you here."

He would have shrugged. Instead, he said, "Smart thing to do. Besides, you don't have any reason to stick around."

"Yes I do." Her voice came out in a half sob.

"Fascination with serial killers?"

"Not exactly."

He flexed his hands, thinking about that. "Was I right?"

More silence. He guessed she was trying to backtrack to whatever he was talking about, obviously not the current subject. "About my self-esteem? Yeah. I guess. More or less." Then, "Sure."

*Like, What do you care, anyway? Just want to show how much you know? Typical man.*

"Not trying to prove anything," he said, in answer to that. "Except to myself."

"What's that mean?"

"I have hunches, once in a while. I have a hunch you're a better person than you think you are."

"Really," she said, dully. Her voice carried the message loud and clear: *Who died and made you God the All Knowing?*

"Yeah. Really."

Another pause. "So how come you know the sheriff?"

Horn thought about that, unsure if he wanted to talk about it. Not what you'd call uplifting conversation, given the current situation. Then he shrugged. "We were both in 'Nam. He was an interrogator. That meant he got to torture people. He was really good at it."

"Sounds like he doesn't like you."

"He was a captain. I was an infantry lieutenant. I called him on something once. One of his patented torture-killings. Stood up to him in front of a colonel, and the colonel backed me. It got put in Fred's record, and killed any chance he had of making major. Fred never forgot that."

Horn's voice got softer, as his mind went back. He stared at nothing. Then, somehow, the rest of it came out. "I brought in a kid one time, from a village that had been napalmed. She was the only survivor. Maybe nine or ten years old. Fred wanted her. Said the village was a known VC hangout. That was the reason they'd hit it. He had a point, after a fashion. Over there, even the kids could kill you. The VC were fighting a desperate war. A brutal war, with no rules. But I figured we had to draw the line somewhere. I wasn't alone. Not everybody was totally paranoid or psychotic.

"She lived with me for three months. Never said a word. Used to come running when the shelling started, curl up beside me in the bunker. The division got a new colonel. Fred must have talked to him. Maybe he pulled in a favor. Anyway, Fred showed up one day with two of his toadies and said he had orders to interrogate her.



He took her. And I --" He stumbled. "I stood there and -- let him. She cried, and said something, the first and only words she ever said to me, and someone told me later it was Vietnamese for 'father'." He almost got it out without choking on the words at the end.

He didn't tell her how he'd promised himself that he'd make it up somehow. He really meant it, too. It helped, for a while, to prop up his non-existent manhood.

Of course, that was before Muck Drippy.

The kid didn't say anything for a while. Then, "So, you're saying he killed her? And you just let him get away with it."

"Yeah. I could have stopped him. Maybe. But nobody cared." He realized his voice was starting to sound strange in his ears. "Not high command, not the division colonel. My so-called peers told me not to make a big deal out of it, go to Saigon on R&R and screw some B-girls, get it out of my system." He gripped the bars again. His voice had gone flat and hard. "No. Body. Cared." Said through gritted teeth, as he shook the bars, and made a few chips of old cement fall.

Dead silence at the other end of the corridor. *There ya go, Horn. The kid's just been raped and beaten, and you're acting sorry for yourself, as usual, like nobody else has any problems. "Sorry."*

It sounded lame, so he shut up before he started sounding like a more complete dickhead than he was already.

Neither of them said anything else. After a time, he thought she must have gone to sleep. Then he heard the weeping sound again. It went on for quite a while.

\* \* \*

"We made a deal. I cannot go back on it." She looked away from Mitch as she spoke, afraid that he would not understand.

Mitch looked at Raphael, who he had come to trust.

Raphael nodded. "If she made a deal, she has to stick to it. One of those crazy rules." He smiled. "If it helps you understand, Sarah is Joe's woman. On loan to me,

you might say. Anyway, you have a relationship with Sally, but she still has a deal with Horn and neither of them can break it, at least not now."

Mitch turned to Sally, but continued to speak to Raphael. "Then I guess it depends on what kind of fella this guy Horn turns out to be." He looked back at Raphael. "He's your friend?"

"More."

Mitch nodded, then shrugged, smiling. "Whatever works, I guess."

\* \* \*

Horn considered his position, and decided he could expect a visit from MD, who would appreciate the convenience of Horn sitting here in a small concrete box with nowhere to run, where a quick, silent thrust would go completely unnoticed, where a slurping, slimy sound would be ignored, where the crunch of hard things breaking would be muffled by the cotton of boredom and apathy and several inches of steel-reinforced concrete.

Knowing this, he felt rising fear in his gut, like a spiked balloon, expanding. And then he began to experience the Shift. But instead of creeping fog and sinister sounds that had become so familiar to him over the years, it became more personal, more intimate...

\* \* \*

As the night drew in, darkening the shadows somehow, deep inside the old stone place, there was a change in perspective. It happened to Horn, once in a while, when something like Muck Drippy, or Fred Tate, was around. In this case, both.

A sleeping man would have had nightmares. Horn got a feeling of impending horror, of immediacy.

Two twenty-two and nine seconds. His internal clock was like a Rolex, he'd used it so long. Horn had a sixth sense. A kind of personal radar. A legacy of training with Sato, a man he'd met after the war, who hid behind doors and trees and jumped out of the shadows and beat Horn with a stick. Horn winced, thinking about it. *The little shit was fast.*

So Horn had developed this sense, from that. And from a long time looking over his shoulder. He sat quietly on the lower bunk, remembering Sato, his teacher.

*Tactile memory of sitting cross-legged on a small wooden platform in the freezing rain, his breath fogging the air. Fighting the shakes, trying to find his center, where calmness and warmth reside. Knowing his sensei sat inside the little house, warm with a dry heat of a crackling fire, sipping tea and reading the sports page of the Tokyo Sun.*

*Trying really hard not to hate his stinking guts...*

The sense, like a radar, recorded a blip. A presence. Right out at the edge of perception, ever so faint. A minute and a half later, another one, a little closer. Horn sat sweating, but his body rapidly cooled as his heart began to slow.

He sensed rather than heard the soft footfall in the corridor. He felt the breath of cold air against his cheek, which he should not have felt, of course, but the situation was not what one would call normal in any case.

"Horn."

The voice was soft as well, but only in timbre, its cold, hard edge shining through like a knife glinting by the light of the moon.

He focused on *here*, stepping back from the other place he had been seeking, more afraid now than at any time he could remember. "Sally."

Though nude, she appeared uncharacteristically normal, a curvy woman of average height, with light brown hair and noteworthy but not otherworldly breasts. "Deal."

He knew what was coming. "You get us out."

She shook her head, seeming oddly uncomfortable. "Not here --"

Horn wanted to ask why not, but just then he sensed another... *presence*.

*... Guess who?*

Sally tilted her head. Her eyes widened. She smiled with the warmth of a night in hell. "Something comes..." She looked at Horn. "You can't walk the shadows," she purred. "Not this time. You know that. The thing that comes, the thing you call Muck Drippy, will find you." She tilted her lovely head toward the kid's cell. "And her."

"Nothing I can do about that." Horn went for stoic, hoping he sounded flat and uncaring.

She paused for effect. "I'll protect her. For a price. I can do that much." She seemed uncharacteristically somber and... almost... human.

"Her alone? Why not both of us?"

She hesitated. "It's this place. Only her. Unless it's you alone. Your choice."

*Her power is limited. Why?* "What's the punch line?" he asked, having a pretty good idea, actually, based on past experience.

"Remember our deal. Make love to me."

Perhaps Horn only imagined the edge of hunger in her voice. "Now would be a good time to do something just for the hell of it."

Sally shrugged. "You know I can't do that. Not now."

Perhaps he'd only imagined a faint trembling in her voice. He knew Sally would keep her word. It was part of who she was. And he knew she could protect the kid. He shouldn't care. In this life you were on your own. But of course, he did care. Thanks to Sarah. *I'll get you for this.*

Horn listened, waiting, and sweating. "OK. Once, like we agreed."

Sally smiled and shook her pretty head. Her body gleamed with sweat in the gloom. "Not exactly."

Before Horn could riposte, she stepped back, and another form entered the scene.

Sarah gripped the bars. "Joe!"

Galvanized out of his fatal lethargy, he leaped up, covering her hands with his, then jumped back as he realized he felt only cool iron.

"I'm not really here," Sarah explained dejectedly. "I'm sitting cross-legged under a tree somewhere west of here, by the road. Off by myself. Sort of zoning out. I found out I could -- follow her." She blew out her cheeks in frustration. "I have no idea how."

For a long minute they stared at each other.

"When you're quite done," Sally said in a slightly disgusted voice.

Horn glanced at Sally. "She doesn't have to be corporeal for something to get her. Get her out of here."

Sally shook her head. "Can't. She insisted on coming with me. Mind you, she should not be able to do it in the first place." She arched an elegant brow. "You couldn't have done it. I couldn't bring anyone with me, either. But here she is." She shrugged fatalistically.

"Why can't you get us out of here?" Horn gestured toward the kid's cell. "Go into the front office, get the keys..."

She looked at him as if he ought to know better. "I already thought of that. My power is severely limited. I was lucky to be able to get here at all." She gestured with her head. "The hall appears to be one part of a whole, but it is not. It's a trap, a chasm. If either of us were to walk its length, we would be lost, forever. Everything is warped, nothing is as it seems." She paused for dramatic effect. "The Rift is here, Horn."

Horn looked at Sarah, at Sally, then down the corridor in the direction of the kid's cell. "Then why come at all?"

Sally said nothing for a moment. "I -- can't say -- exactly."

Sally not only looked different, she acted different. "What's going on here?"

Sarah smiled strangely, as Sally suddenly turned away, looking uncomfortable. "She found someone she didn't want to kill." Sarah caressed Horn's hand, even though neither of them could feel it. "Maybe all those times you dominated her meant something after all."

Her back still turned, Sally spat something unintelligible into the darkness.

Horn's cock got hard at the special sound of Sarah's voice, her *please fuck me* voice -- in spite of the hideous danger lurking nearby. "He's close. Too close."

Sally turned back to face him. "You have to fuck me, Horn," she said in the calm, otherworldly voice that Horn knew so well. "If you want me to protect the girl. I can't change that. I can, however, add something to it."

"How?"

Sally smiled. "Invite me in and see."

He nodded, looking at Sarah. Sally moved, slipping inside the cell. Outside, Sarah looked forlorn.

Sally smiled again, not quite her usual cat-got-the-canary smile. Without turning, she said in a voice with a strangely commanding tone, "Come, Sarah."

With a wide-eyed look, as though she felt a compulsion she could not resist, Sarah's image flowed into the cell, and into Sally. Sally gasped as if she'd been dunked in ice cold water. Her eyes flared in frightened surprise. She staggered forward, into Horn's arms.

They stared at each other for a second. "Joe!" Sally said in Sarah's voice. "Oh, Joe!" She clutched him fiercely.

He felt her, Sarah, in his arms, and realized what Sally had done. He held her tightly, burying his face in her unremarkable brown hair, smelling the musk that was truly Sarah, not Sally.

"Joe," Sarah whispered. "We have to --" She actually blushed, looking at him. "I can feel her with me. Almost like she's right behind me. She's terribly aroused right now. As I am. Please fuck me," she whispered fiercely. "No, wait, we have to get you out -- no, she says you can't leave, because --" She looked around. "A girl?"

Horn nodded. "A kid. Found her on the road, following me. I don't know the whole story, but Sally's right. We can't get her out, so I have to stay. I can't get out anyway. Only Sally can actually walk through walls around here."

"Then," she closed her eyes, "fuck me, Joe. Fuck me hard and long and make me remember it forever."

Horn undressed, revealing a taut, lean body with heavy shoulders and an impressive cock, now hard and throbbing, because in spite of the danger -- or maybe because of it -- Horn was so focused and so in the moment that he could achieve a heightened state of sexual arousal.

Sarah leaned back against the bars, entwining her hands over her head, as Horn engulfed her ass in his powerful hands. He teased her, letting his cock rub against her

cunt, bending his head to lightly bite her nipples. She closed her eyes and whimpered, arching her back to thrust her breasts at him.

*Already I'm so hot I could scream. I'm terrified of what lurks in the dark, but I can't do anything now. I'm helpless. The thought made her more excited. I could die in a second. But his body turns me on so much! He controls me!*

Horn sensed her excitement. He smelled it, tasted it, felt it flowing out of her like musk. Losing himself in her body, he drove his cock into her.

She gasped as his hard length penetrated her. "Ah, Joe! I love your cock!" She moaned, humping Horn's cock with carnal hunger, more hunger than she thought she ought to feel right now, considering how recently and thoroughly she had been fucked by Raphael and how close they all were to terrible danger.

She wrapped her legs around him, very strong legs supporting her weight on his hips, releasing his hands to play with her breasts. His touch electrified her, tearing the cover off her fantasy of being taken like a whore. Her nipples stood out, his hard hands on them, his cock thrusting into her, triggering a strong orgasm. She cried out in pure pleasure.

Horn wanted to be finished, to get her out of here, because he feared for her, and even for Sally, but he could not stop, maybe not even if Muck Drippy appeared right now. This woman was Sarah, and she drove him wild, making his fantasies real, making him want her more each time he touched her, raising the animal in him like a tornado of passion.

"You're mine, you sexy slave, mine!" he snarled, momentarily overcome with his need to use her, own her, take her. He wanted her pleasure, wanted to rip the screams from her throat. He adored her and considered her a toy at the same time. He could not stop loving her, yet he got his greatest pleasure from treating her like a slave.

Horn watched her face, contorted with passion; her body weaving and writhing against the bars, sweat streaming down her naked torso. He felt her legs twined about him like steel cables, clamping harder as she came, trying to drive his cock deeper into her, her voice penetrating to his groin. "Yes! God, yes, Master! Use me! Use me!"

He came explosively, momentarily oblivious to anything except her carnal perfection. "God, I love you!"

After a minute Horn remembered that Muck Drippy was out there and if this didn't bring him along nothing would. He withdrew his cock in spite of his powerful hunger, holding Sarah close one last time, breathing into her sweat-soaked hair. "Get out of here. Try to find this place. Follow the trail that presents itself to you."

He didn't know where this last arcane comment came from, but he knew it was true.

She shuddered in his arms, and he noted a change in her, something intangible, as Sarah's elongated image flowed out of her and resolved itself beside them. He looked down and saw Sally. Her face was strangely soft, suffused with the afterglow of sex and something deeper, more meaningful.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Momentarily Sally returned his hug, still trembling from what he had done to her. Then she turned away.

Sarah looked at him as though trying to burn his image into her retinas. Then they were gone.

\* \* \*

July sixth. Two thirty-one AM, on the nose. A dark, grimy cell in the Homer, Indiana, Municipal Holding Facility. Horn dressed and resumed his position on the cot, twisting his supple legs into the lotus position, calming himself.

Muck Drippy was close.

From the direction of the office, Horn heard stumbling footsteps, and loud haranguing in a slurred voice. The night watch entered the corridor, prodding a stumbling figure.

The door across the corridor slid open and the drunk staggered in, collapsing on one of the lower bunks. He half rose with incoherent protest then fell back, snoring thunderously. The night watch receded down the corridor.



Horn's heightened senses picked up the smells of beer, sweat and vomit. He was non-judgmental. Been there. Done that.

Curious that they brought him here, instead of the new facility. Lazy bastards.

Eventually, the drunk turned on his side and stopped snoring.

Horn long ago stopped asking why Muck Drippy followed him. It had become a Zen-like point. Unfinished business, from a scummy bog in 'Nam, when seven men, supposedly his men, tied him to a tree and worked him over until he coughed blood. And then his sergeant, Wilfred Hawkins, appeared out of the shadows, pulled out his K-Bar fighting knife, and started carving patterns in Horn's chest. In the middle of the screaming, when he was wishing for death, Muck Drippy rose out of the bog, and by God, Horn got his wish.

It had been a lot of years, a lot of running. A lot of not knowing why. *Maybe someday the answer will come to me.* Not now, though. Now, MD was there. Horn heard him. Slithering slowly like the wet night breeze. Drifting up through the sewer pipes to the floor drain outside his cell, a careful creeping felt through the earth and the concrete and the soles of his feet. Following the signs, the trail, that led him to Horn. There had been a lot of activity recently. A lot of splashing in the water. The shark had been alerted, and was cruising nearby.

Something moved in the corridor. A presence felt rather than heard. The not quite imagined stench of something long, long dead, but still alive. A shadow, darker than the night.

In the background, a roar, like surf in a cave, then a pause, then again. The drunk, breathing.

Horn could walk in shadow, sometimes, but he had to be in the right place at the right time, and this stinking cell was neither. So, Horn sat, quiet as death, and did what he had done once before. Only once. He disappeared.

*Fall into your center, Sato said. Drift on a cloud.* Bunch of other oriental crap. Horn thought of it like a spear tossed into a still pond, barely breaking the surface, shooting

down into the cold depths, silently burying itself in the bottom with a tiny puff of sand. Everything settled. Nothing showed. Nothing.

Nothing. Heart beating maybe ten times a minute. Slower. Body temperature dropping, dropping, until it was the same as the bunk on which he sat, lotus style, hands resting on his thighs, palms up.

Silence. But there was still a presence, and a faint, ugly stain in the air.

Slithering sounds.

The rustle of clothing as the drunk shifted in his sleep.

Glop glop, as something dripped water and slime on the floor.

Death in the air thick as grease, but Horn wasn't there to smell it.

Across the corridor, the drunk's bunk frame squeaked, slightly. Movement, mumble of a man half awake, half asleep. MD was right there, a thick shadow in the corridor, right outside. Waiting. Sensing.

*Looking for Horn.*

*Looking.*

*Looking.*

Finally deciding, if that could possibly be the right word, that Horn was not here, and he went for the first available snack. MD moved the way he could, through the bars, into the drunk's cell, a malformed stick figure with a bloated belly, grotesque appendages moving aimlessly.

The drunk was louder now, coming awake, sensing something.

MD moved with no sound, reaching out with a long stick-arm, hooked the prey out of his bunk and into the gaping maw.

Terror. Waves of it, buffeting like a hurricane, that would have sent Horn through the wall. Reinforced concrete was nothing next to this.

But he wasn't there.

Muck Drippy's belly churned and flopped to the quick, soft sounds of struggling, because the prey wasn't dead yet, one arm still dangling from the blubbery mouth like a stray piece of spaghetti, fingers scraping bloody furrows on the wall. The air resonated

with a stifled scream of death. The arm was sucked down. Muck Drippy began masticating with sudden teeth, the prey's mind long gone, waste voided within the folds of the thing that had him, then a muffled *crunch, splurt, crunch. Slurp.*

And then, a moment and one lifetime later, MD shifted again, and then again, and then he was gone.

\* \* \*

Three twenty-one and twenty-three seconds.

Horn surfaced, took a long, careful breath. Still in survival mode, calm and rational. Body temperature in the seventies. An EMT would be frantic.

The shaking wouldn't start for a while.

MD had missed this time. But he'd be back. When the trail ended like this, a total blank, or he'd just had a snack, like the drunk (*un parfait, monsieur?*), he just went away, back to wherever it was he called home, and waited for the next incoming tremor on the web. He could be fooled, but never for long.

There was nothing for anyone to see, except the bloody finger marks on the wall. But the air was thick with the shredded pieces of a human life.

Another bystander. Another nail pounded into Horn's wooden soul.

Horn didn't really care. He couldn't. If he did, he would go mad.

He sat in a puddle of sweat, as cold as a corpse and perhaps only a little more alive, something else he didn't really care about. He only considered the pragmatic result. Anyone standing outside would not have seen him.

Down the corridor, he heard the kid tossing in her sleep. She made a slurred, weeping sound. Horn wondered what he would have done if the drunk hadn't been there as a decoy. MD would have gone after her, for sure.

Then he realized he hadn't heard the kid before, when in his heightened state of awareness he could have heard the death rattle of an ant, because...

Sally had kept her word.

*Yes, Horn,* came the faint thought that was not his. *I did that for you. At some cost. But believe this. She is worth saving.*

He dragged air into his creaking lungs, staring at nothing. And waited.

## Chapter Seven

*The checkered landscape rolled beneath her, showing sunless decay, dead trees, ruined buildings, the skeletons of corpses long dead. She knew this could not be real but knew also that it soon would be.*

*The future? Or a possibility?*

*Sarah tried frantically to get her bearings. Where was north? Which way was the truck? But the scene whirled like a kaleidoscope, as though she had been sucked into a tornado. Where was Sally? Sarah had followed her to the jail...*

*She felt herself drawn downward, falling into a void that desperately needed filling. As she fell into her waiting body, she felt the faint tingling of Horn's presence, of his essence, trailing behind her like a lifeline...*

\* \* \*

Sarah opened her eyes. Through the trees she saw the eastern sky just beginning to show the pink of dawn. She rose, stretching, feeling wrenched and relaxed at the same time.

Her body tingled with the memory of being fucked by Horn, but her muscles and joints complained from being settled in one position for five hours.

A tall, shadowed figure leaned against a tree. Raphael stepped toward her.

"You've been watching over me?" she asked.

He shrugged and took her into his arms.

She looked up. "I saw Joe. I spoke with him..." She hesitated.

"Had an otherworldly experience?" Raphael asked, chuckling.

She smiled. "I guess. Look, he's in a holding facility. I think I know the way, but I can't figure out how to explain it." She paused, closing her eyes in frustration. "We have to get going."

Raphael nodded. They walked back to the rig, parked on a narrow gravel side road. Mitch opened the door and stepped down from the cab, a tire iron in one beefy hand. When he saw them he put the tire iron back. "What's for breakfast?"

"Fast food if we're lucky. Sarah got directions. Sort of."

She grimaced. "It ought to be easy in a little place like this, but... nothing is as it seems, to quote Sally." She looked around. "Where is she?"

Mitch shrugged. The set of his shoulders betrayed tension. "I'm not real used to this 'new reality' or whatever you like to call it. Maybe she decided to go back to wherever she calls home."

Sarah slipped her hand into her jacket pocket, instinctively seeking the letter from her father. Her heart stopped when she felt nothing.

"Easy," said Raphael, holding out the letter. "While you were -- traveling -- I sensed something in your clothing. Found the letter. It's been around, you know, in some strange places. And it's connected to Joe somehow. I expect he had a hand in getting it to you."

Sarah put the letter back in her pocket, feeling uncomfortable. "So you read it?"

Raphael nodded. "With no intention of prying. I had to know why it resonated the way it did."

Sarah nodded, looking away.

"Having a hard time figuring out if you love him?"

"I'd appreciate it if you'd stay out of my private thoughts."

"We aren't what we've done. We are what we do."

"Meaning everything is all right if I just do a good deed once in a while? Gas a million Jews, then feed a stray dog and I'm clean?"

Raphael arched one eyebrow. "You think wisdom is that simple? Self-examination is what makes us human. Your dad left you and then he sent you that letter. You know he meant what he wrote. So is he what he did before, or what he did later?"

"That's different."

"From what? You think he'd disapprove of who you are and what you've done, with Joe and me?"

"It feels wrong," she admitted. "I mean..." She shook her head. "It's not that easy. He was cruel, distant, judgmental. Everything was his way or the highway."

"A lot of dads are like that."

"He called my mother a whore because she complained he didn't fuck her enough."

"Maybe he was the product of his upbringing. Like you said, it's not that simple. Like you, for instance."

She looked up, fire in her eyes. "What, a chick who likes being a sex toy to you and Joe and -- and -- God, any other man who crooks his finger at me --"

"It's your choice, Sarah."

"No, it isn't!" she shouted. "That's what kills me. I can't help it! I'm a slut!"

"Or a passionate woman who enjoys sex. You are a strong, intelligent woman who has made a conscious choice about your sexual orientation."

"Fucking male viewpoint."

"Man, do you ever sound Catholic," said Raphael.

Sarah sighed. "Joe said to follow the path that presents itself. And Sally said the rift is right there, where they have Joe."

Raphael nodded, then looked beyond her. Sarah turned.

Sally stood in the grass a short distance away. "Quickly. We have to go. Now."

\* \* \*

The night watch had brought in the drunk, then walked out. Never did a bed check. Probably sat out front reading the current issue of Big Bazooms.

Stetson wandered in around seven thirty, didn't even glance at the empty cell, where Horn could still smell the dampness of fear, the reek of death. The drunk must have been entered in the log up front, but Stetson hadn't checked, and the night watch had gone home without saying anything. Or if he did, Stetson just figured the drunk had already been released. *And that, folks, is death in a small town.*

Breakfast was glop. He'd had that before. In the army they called it chow.

He waited, as the day passed. Thought about the dead silence of this place, how perfect it was for what Fred wanted to do. Stone walls, metal bars. Scummy toilet, no lid. Mold on the walls. Roaches. The place reeked of neglect. And age.

*Ding.*

They'd moved out. Everyone had gone over to the new facility.

Fred had known ahead of time that Horn must be in the neighborhood, from the prints in Alice Murdock's house. He'd had time to plan his revenge. Kill Horn, hand the DA a dead and therefore easily convicted suspect, and then on to election day. Horn remembered the poster for Miz Fraser, who had her heart set on a life of probate.

The kid represented an inconvenient but not unfixable snag. Runaways were nameless, faceless. They need only dispose of her, quickly and not necessarily cleanly. She hangs herself in her cell, or they let her go and she falls into a river, or gets run down at three AM. Easy.

She'd be a little Jane Doe in the county morgue. Maybe Judge Fraser would handle the probate. Torn jeans and a broken Mickey Mouse watch.

Stetson brought gruel for lunch, but Horn ate nothing. He sipped water, waiting.

\* \* \*

Evening.

Footsteps. Shadow outside the cell.

Stetson had a big ring with a bunch of keys on it. He scraped an old, rusty key in the big old, rusty lock. The door slid open on squeaky rollers, clanking at the end of the track. Stetson stood uncertainly, his gun hanging loose in his hand.

Fred strode down the hall. A length of rope trailed from one hand. They tied Horn's hands, laid him out on the cold concrete. As Stetson cinched up the knots good and tight, Fred squatted beside Horn, elbows on his knees, smiling a little, with eyes like chips of slate. "You an' me got some catchin' up to do," he said.

"Uh -- Dad --" Stetson began.



Sam turned his lizard gaze on his son. "Now you just run along, son. I ain't gonna mark him up, yet. I'll call you when it gets good."

Stetson's eyes shifted toward the corridor. "Dad, can I --"

"Sam," Fred said, real low, in that voice that Horn remembered. "You'll get your turn with the girl. After me, y'understand? Now git out to the office, in case we get a call."

Stetson shifted uncertainly, then left. Horn heard him pause by the kid's cell, imagined him staring at her through the bars. A lizard, waiting for dinner.

"Damn kids and their hormones." Fred chuckled. He turned to Horn. "Now, boy. Let's chat."

Horn understood flashbacks. He'd had a few. Not like this, though.

*... listening to Fred talk to the slope, a sixteen-year-old kid who'd probably been fighting for six or seven years. Fred's quiet, sibilant voice carried out into the steamy night and sliced through his soul like a garrote through warm cheese, as he scraped away a piece of skin, about an inch square, off the end of the big toe. Horn remembered the screaming.*

Horn snapped back to the present as Fred's big hand touched him, on his belly, lying there like a fat spider. Delicately probing. Working up to the sternum, right under the heart.

Horn fought the urge to squirm. Fred wanted that. Horn tried to give him back the dead eyes look, but Fred pressed down with two fingers into the solar plexus. Horn bucked, and his vision went black.

"Now let's check here," murmured Fred, and the probing fingers found the spot behind the jaw hinge, dug in like iron hooks, creating awesome pain that Horn couldn't escape, and then the groin, just a little tap, a little squeeze, quick and sharp, then the finger at the base of the throat, just above the clavicle, right down into the vocal cords, and he wanted to scream but he couldn't, not now, it would make the pain worse, and then into the armpit.

Fred played Horn like a musical instrument, seeing what sort of sound he could create by pressing this button, then that one, maybe two or three together.

"Your problem, son, is about what I figured," Fred noted. "Looks like you're a tad tougher than most. You ain't even started screamin' yet. And you ain't blacked out, which ain't likely anyways, 'cause I ain't forgot how to do this, y'know? So bein' more macho than the usual piece of shit we get in here ain't gonna help you at all. But the real problem is even simpler than that. Hey, I oughta get Sam back in here to watch this one. Boy needs to learn the trade. You just grab this piece o' skin and twist and jerk sorta at the same time --"

Horn did scream then, a short, strangled sound.

"So anyways, the real problem is, like in the old days, you remember the old days, Horn? The old days, when I had rank, and a career, and a fucking job?"

He pressed hard enough to rupture something, right into the inside of Horn's thigh, and Horn did black out then, but only for a sweet, blissful second.

"In the old days, Horn, when I was workin', you could get me to stop by just tellin' me what it was I wanted ta know. Remember? Then it was all nice and sweet, we cut you down and helped you out back, just outside the perimeter, where that big pit was dug, open the jugular with a K-Bar, that was that. But I guess you probably figured this out, 'cause you got a college degree, you're a smart boy, so you already know the real problem is that it ain't gonna stop, not ever, Horny boy, it's gonna go on like this for-fucking-ever, 'cause there ain't one single fucking thing I want to know from you, Horn, not one single fucking thing."

Most of this meant nothing to Horn, because he had passed into the netherworld of blue-black pain, where he could have been screaming his fool head off and he wouldn't have been able to tell. He screamed on the inside, as he approached the whimpering stage. The pain, the pain, the pain...

And then it just went away, which made it worse, because he knew it would return. Like being in total darkness, and getting hit in the face and not knowing when and where the next punch would come from, just knowing it would.

He trembled uncontrollably, his breath coming in short grunts of pain. He told himself he had suffered no actual damage, because Fred liked to work that way. He had

a lot of professional pride. But Horn kept his eyes closed to hold back the tears, the whimpering. *This is how it ends, stretched out on a cold concrete floor in a stinking little cell in a backwater burg, and I want someone here to hold me and say everything will be all right.*

Like Death, Fred's voice whispered, "Ain't no way out, Horny boy. Ain't no way out."

## Chapter Eight

The letter, yellowed and creased from being opened and closed so many times, felt fragile and precious. She opened it again, knowing every word, every comma. Every nuance.

*Sarah,*

*If you're reading this, I'm dead.*

*I know you hate me, and I guess you got the right. But just read this, and then throw it away and forget it if you want.*

*The hardest thing I ever did was leave you and your mother that night. It still hurts and I guess it always will. Your mom and me didn't get along, I guess that's pretty clear. So I left. I don't know, maybe I should have stayed, but I didn't, so that's it. I just wanted to say something I wish I'd said before I left.*

*I love you.*

*I never said it before, did I? It's something dads are supposed to tell their daughters, but I never did. I'm real sorry about that. I love you more than anyone or anything. I only cried once in my life, sweetheart. When I drove away from the house. Nearly hit a car at Wentworth and Hill. Went right through the intersection, with everything all blurry.*

*Anyway, you can forget me or hate me or whatever you want, nothing I can do about that. But if you've read this far you know I love you.*

*Dad*

Sarah refolded the letter and slipped it back inside the pocket of her leather jacket.

Sally sat between her and Mitch in the cab, while Raphael stood on the step outside, holding on through the open window. In the long shadows of dawn they rumbled slowly through town, passing little rectangular bungalows with neatly trimmed lawns, on streets lined with old trees that shaded the sidewalks.

They came to a branching road and Mitch slowed, looking at Sarah.

She stared ahead, trying to feel the right direction. *This is insane.* She gritted her teeth and cursed under her breath, then said, "Go right." Thinking she had no clue if this was the correct direction then suddenly feeling *Yes. This is the way...*

Signs indicated they had turned onto a main street through the business section. The road veered slightly, twisting and diving under a railroad trestle. When they emerged on the far side, the scenery shifted.

Business section, indeed. The buildings became fewer, and the trees along the road became thicker, darker and brooding, with gnarly branches intertwined. Houses receded into the background. They looked old and faded, in some cases clearly empty, with broken windows like dark eye sockets.

Sarah looked around, fear tugging at her. "I'm not sure --"

Sally touched her leg. "This is the way. We should stop here." A moot comment. Within a hundred yards the road ended in a thick line of trees.

They left the rig and proceeded on foot. Mitch grabbed the arm-length tire iron, glancing at Raphael, who nodded. Mitch looked at the trees, then at Sally. "This don't look like a normal road."

"It's not." Sally stared ahead. "This is worse than I had expected. This is probably your last chance to turn back."

Mitch shook his head.

She stepped into the shadows.

\* \* \*

Much more quickly than it should, the day became night as they walked. The woods became darker, the shadows deeper and more sinister. They heard strange rustlings, not quite identifiable, and saw tiny movements from the corners of their eyes.

Sally led. Raphael walked silently beside Sarah, constantly glancing around, clearly on edge. He seemed preoccupied. Sarah yearned to talk to him in private. Instead, she reached out and touched his arm as they walked.

He turned and looked down at her, smiled briefly, then returned to his mobile sentry duty. "What's up?" she ventured to ask.

He shrugged. "We're getting close."

Sally turned her head. "He's right. I can guarantee nothing anymore."

Sarah noted Sally's lush red lips and heavy breasts. In spite of herself, Sarah felt a little erotic thrill. *I wish I could trust her, the way I trust Joe...*

The woods gave way to a road, and then houses. Stunted, dying trees created shifting shadows. As they crossed through the overgrown backyard of a rundown bungalow that seemed empty of life, with a sagging roof and ragged holes for windows, Sarah felt unreal silence descend on them. Fear rose in her like bile.

Raphael hissed something under his breath.

"No!" whispered Sally fiercely. "You'll draw them to us!"

"Now would be a good time for the 82nd Airborne to drop in," muttered Mitch, hefting the iron bar.

Across the way, from the broken windows of another house, dark mist poured out and rolled across the ground toward them. Ahead, figures crept through the yellow, waist-high weeds. Sally turned to Raphael. "Take them through there." She pointed to their left, away from the mist, where an empty two-story building stood in the middle of a garbage-strewn lot. Maybe two hundred yards. "It's bad in there, but it's better than dealing with this." She jerked her head toward the oncoming mist. "Go now. You're on your own."

Raphael looked at her, at the mist, at the dark figures that seemed no farther than a stone's throw, but remained indiscernible in the tall weeds. They emanated palpable dread.

Sally read his thoughts. "Yes, it could be a trick of mine. But it's not. I --" She shook her head. "Go!"

Mitch began to protest, then stopped at Raphael's touch.

Sally's body became longer, leaner, elongating into something vaguely reptilian, with wicked claws. Before the transformation became complete, she disappeared in the shadow of a gnarled oak.

Mitch stared at the spot where Sally had changed, wide eyed. He glanced at the others. Raphael said, "It changes nothing about who she is." Then he grunted, "Let's go!"

The mist rolled toward them like smoke before a wildfire. Sarah glimpsed movement within it. Behind them they heard the sounds of sudden death.

As they raced toward the house Sally had pointed out, Sarah glanced back. Something moved through the shadows and the grass with incredible speed. Figures scattered then came together in a crowd. The mist rolled over them all, eliciting more sounds and motion. A high-pitched scream pierced the air, a sound of bloodlust rather than fear.

"Whatever they are, they gonna be fuckin' sorry they messed with Sally," panted Raphael.

The old building, of gray clapboard, leaning heavily and threatening to cave in, reared up before them. They slowed, catching their breath. Behind them, Sarah heard more screams, high, raucous and inhuman. Screams of death.

Raphael nodded toward a single door that hung partly open. It beckoned darkly. They stood in shadow created by indeterminate light.

Movement alerted Sarah. A blur shot out of the darkness straight for Raphael. Sarah whirled, leg extended, contacting something hard and heavy. The weight of it knocked her off her feet, but her powerful wheel kick sent it careening against the wall, shattering boards. It reversed itself in mid-flight and hurtled back, this time at Sarah. She leapt up, lashing out with the extended fingers of one hand, screaming like a banshee.

The shock went into her center, stunning her and sending her reeling. She dropped and rolled, and popped up in a fighting stance.

At her feet lay a broken mass that vaguely resembled a bat on steroids. Its wings spanned three or four feet, with an elongated head. And a long, barbed tail.

Her arm felt numb, and she could barely raise it. Fiery pain lanced through her hand. "Shit! Shit! Shit!" she screeched, fearing the fingers had broken.

"Shit, woman!" Raphael rushed to her. "You OK?"

She leaned against him briefly. "Yeah. What --"

"She's been hurt." Mitch turned his back to them and hefted the iron.

"God damn, I've never seen a person move so fast." Raphael smiled. "You're a bad ass chick, honey." Then he frowned. "Let me see that." Before she could remind him that they needed to get moving, he grasped her injured hand in both of his.

Instantly, the pain increased ten-fold. She gasped, biting her lip to keep from crying out. The pain faded. Warmth and feeling flowed through her hand and arm.

Other pain penetrated the numbness. "You been cut," Raphael said almost to himself.

The sleeve of her jacket had been shredded, and blood flowed from a cut in her forearm. "I'll be OK. I'm a bad ass chick."

Raphael moved his grip to her forearm, closed his eyes, and released his breath in a long sigh.

Sarah felt warmth and then more of the unreal pain she had felt in her hand. She held steady, as the cut began to itch furiously. The itch faded. Raphael released her.

She blinked in confusion. The cut had healed. She looked at it, then at him.

She stared, unsure if she saw him clearly. He seemed tired. *No. Older. There are some new lines in his face...*

"That thing carried poison. You'd have died in minutes." The fighting in the weeds had quieted. Raphael looked grim. "Let's go."

They ran into the house. Darkness enveloped them with cold fingers. The floor creaked alarmingly. Raphael cursed as his foot went through a rotted board. He jerked it out, and Sarah gasped as a hand grabbed for it. Mitch stepped in and smashed it with the iron, cracking more boards. Bones splintered, but no blood spattered, and the hand continued to struggle on the floor. They moved quickly on.

The room had no other exit, save a narrow stair leading up into darkness.

"Oh, great," muttered Sarah. "The dark at the top of the stairs."

They started up. Each step creaked with its own sepulchral voice.



*Doom. Death. Fear. Blood.*

They slowly mounted the steps, Raphael leading Sarah and then Mitch. The stairs seemed to go on for quite a way, much more than a single flight. Halfway up, Raphael halted suddenly, sucking in his breath. His bulky form blocked her view, but Sarah instantly became less concerned about that, as a shape appeared behind them, at the bottom.

The shape seemed wraith-like, a tall form in a long cloak, with a broad-brimmed hat. Under the flat brim, she glimpsed a spot of paleness that could have been a face. Or not.

Mitch watched the shape, and the iron trembled in his hands.

From the top of the stairs a voice that sounded like the exhale of stale air from a crypt said, "You seem to be at an impasse, Raphael. Up or down. Damned if you do, damned if you... do." It emitted a sound that, in one's worst nightmare, might have been a chuckle.

Sarah leaned around Raphael. The voice came from a shape similar to the one behind her. She glanced down again, and saw that the first one had begun mounting the steps.

"You'd be wise to let us pass," said Raphael.

"I think not." More of the nightmare chuckle.

Sarah gritted her teeth. *I hate ghoulish humor.*

Raphael reached back, groping blindly as if to check that Sarah stood close behind him. Sarah put her hand in his, but he shook her off. The wraith below them slowly climbed the stairs, making no more sound than smoke. It raised one long, skeletal arm. The fingers seemed skeletal themselves, but the darkness made it difficult to tell.

Mitch's breath came harder and tighter in his chest. He glanced back but could not see Sarah's face. "Get ready to go. Don't hang back," he muttered.

He felt her hand on his shoulder. "Not without my friends, Mitch."

The tightness in his chest eased, and he smiled a little. He turned back to face the specter.

"We have power," Raphael intoned. "She has as much as I. Let us pass." His hand groped more desperately.

Sarah's heart beat hard and fast. The wraith below came on, faster. Icy dread flew before it. She knew its touch meant death, or perhaps something worse. She prayed for a weapon...

She reached into her jacket, withdrawing the letter from her father. Her dead father. In her bitter anger at his abandonment of her as a child, she had discarded the letter without reading it, at the place where he had been buried. Years later, Joe Horn had recovered it, somehow, and delivered it to her. In the interim, she knew, it had been -- places. Raphael had sensed its existence. Something about it made it special. She pushed the letter into Raphael's outstretched hand.

"See my power!" he thundered, as he tossed the letter at the wraith.

The letter, light and worn from being folded and refolded dozens of times, fluttered weakly in the air and fell.

As it fell, Raphael muttered something under his breath, a few strange syllables. The letter hovered in mid-air then came apart at the creases. The three separate pieces seemed to come to life, first fluttering upward, then steadying and flying through the air. As they struck the wraith at the top of the stairs, Sarah heard it sigh, like air escaping a balloon, and it collapsed in on itself. She glanced back and saw the other wraith halt, and then fall in on itself as the first one had.

Raphael grabbed her jacket and hauled her up the stairs. Mitch scrambled after them. They stumbled onto a small landing. Far below, the dim light from the lower floor winked out as a door that Sarah knew had not been there before slammed shut.

Dusty beams of weak light leaked through a broken window. More stairs led upward. Sarah craned her neck up and around, but could not see the top. "What now?"

The remains of the window shattered inward as a bulky form crashed through, falling on Raphael. It encircled him with multiple rubbery tentacles as it bore him to the floor.

Sarah, desperate for a weapon, grabbed a broken piece of the window frame that still held an embedded shard of glass. She struck the thing, slicing it open. It lurched away from Raphael and reached for her. She knocked away one arm, then another. Two more grabbed her legs, sweeping her to the floor. The misshapen head split to show a wet gash of a mouth running vertically. She jammed the stick into the mouth.

Mitch stepped in, screaming, and struck with the iron, crushing the head.

It rolled off Sarah, crashing down the stairs.

Raphael heaved her to her feet. They all ran up the stairs, followed by the sound of the tentacle thing slithering after them.

The stairs ended in another landing with neither a window nor a door.

"Dead end," gasped Sarah.

Mitch stepped to the edge of the stairs. "Do what you can. I'll try to buy some time."

Raphael kicked the wall, which rumbled and shook, but did not give way. Sarah turned at a sound and saw their pursuer lurch onto the lower landing. Behind it, two more dark shapes came into view. They began to climb the stairs.

"Raphael, can you move through shadow?" asked Sarah, dreading the answer.

He shook his head. "Not here. I already tried, back there with the wraiths. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't."

Sarah steeled herself for the end. She touched Raphael. *I love you both. Remember me, Joe. Remember me...*

A hand touched her shoulder. She jumped about a foot, but the hand part registered before she executed a disemboweling kick.

Another man stood with them on the landing, as silent as snow in the forest. Shadows covered him. He gently moved Sarah to one side.

Mitch turned and jumped as well, but the stranger's preternatural calm affected him, too. He stepped back, making way.

Raphael nodded as if in recognition and stepped aside.

Sarah stared at the man. He turned and gestured behind her, at what Raphael had already seen. A door stood open. Nothing could be seen beyond it.

The stairs shook as lumpy shadows crawled toward them.

The man spoke to her in a voice as quiet and still as morning light. "The thing about love is, it don't care. You'll be OK."

Raphael grabbed her shoulder. "Go! Now!" He shoved her toward the door.

Sarah stumbled backward, still staring at the man. As Raphael virtually carried her through the door, she reached toward the man. "No --"

He raised one hand, briefly, then turned back to meet their pursuers. Mitch offered the iron, and the man took it, pausing to watch them go. Then he raised the iron.

## Chapter Nine

In the screaming pit of his pain, something nibbled at the edge of what remained of Horn's mind. In 'Nam, he'd known a young lieutenant whose platoon got pinned hard by a VC division. They were eating it bad. So this lieutenant called in artillery, right on his own position. Just his luck his own people couldn't hit the floor with a hammer. Saved his men and got the Medal of Honor.

Horn's sense for MD worked all the time. He knew MD had to be near, still looking, still scratching his blob-like skull, still waiting for the incoming e-mail.

Concentrating, Horn tweaked the web.

It might have been a second, a minute, or a year. Fred made pain into a temporal experience. He lost his temper once, for no particular reason, just because he was Fred, and raked his hard, broken nails across Horn's chest, making long furrows that quickly filled with blood.

Blood streamed off his body now, and his voice quivered, almost breaking. Sato had beat the hell out of him now and again, so Horn would know pain, and be able to deal with it, and Horn had thought there could be no pain that would ever surpass that, but he could not have been more wrong.

He screamed, and off in the misty distance he thought he heard the kid screaming too. Pleading. "Stop! Please, stop! Please, stop hurting him!"

And she screamed something else, something Horn had heard once before, but it had been a long time ago, and anyway it hardly mattered --

-- because MD stood right there, inches away. Horn had never been this close to him, and the nearness felt otherworldly, something that defied reason.

He twisted, curling his body and got his feet under him. The rope had been secured to a rough-edged piece of angle iron, which in time would have succeeded in

separating the strands, but of course Horn felt mildly agitated, with the result that he snapped his bonds like overcooked spaghetti.

Fred didn't interfere with any of this. His screams pierced the thick air, just like the men in the bog, like several others, a lot of others.

Fred screamed and screamed, and his screams went from human to animal to something else entirely, rising from harsh pain to a strange, terror-driven squeal, to a sound that seemed softly feminine, but went through the soul like a rusty spear.

MD slowly, steadily, maliciously and with great apparent glee tore him to pieces, first the hands and arms then the feet and legs, showering blood and body parts all over the cell. He had this thing he could do so Fred didn't die right away, not all at once, but a piece at a time, his wide eyes showing even in the gloom.

Horn launched himself across the damp, slick concrete, and felt something touch him, something that sent a shock of pure, icy terror through him.

Then he went out the door, scrambling like a cat on a waxed floor.

He headed for the door at the end of the corridor, that stood open a crack, showing a sliver of ever-lovin' light. Then, as his brain screamed *run, you fool!* he stopped.

There, in the last cell before the door to the front office. The kid.

Big eyes stared out at him, silent and afraid. Terrified. On the edge of total insanity, because it might have been an hour since the screaming started, or only a few seconds, but it only took a moment of that to drive you right to the edge, and she teetered there, alone, with horrible, slimy death about fifty feet down the hall. Horn stood before her, dirty and sweaty and bloody and battered, a wild-eyed lunatic who could not look like anything she could be hoping to see, ever, but next to the denizen in the cell down there he was Christ the Savior.

Horn hesitated that half second, and then the screaming stopped. He heard muffled movement.

Horn looked at the kid. Undernourished, under-loved, a big-eyed waif. Another broad he'd have to carry until she decided to rip him off or turn on him some other

way. Someone he would have to learn to trust and respect and treat like a real human being, until MD came and got her. She'd be a drag any way you looked at it.

MD moved into the corridor.

The kid stared at Horn, her eyes as big as saucers, small fists wrapped around rusty iron.

From out in the office came Stetson's voice, with a whiny edge, "Dad, are you doin' the bitch, yet? Shit, c'mon, Dad, you said I'd get ta use her --"

Stetson paused, and Horn almost heard the wheels grinding inside his concrete skull as he started to figure out that maybe something wasn't going just right. Horn heard the shuffle and stamp of feet. Then the *snick-click* of a round being run into the chamber of Stetson's semi-auto.

Horn shook his head, mumbled, "Sorry, kid," and he moved toward Stetson's voice, trying with little success to block out the sound of the small "No..."

He came out the door about the time Stetson came in, and Horn did not hesitate as he had before the cell, but continued moving with that fluidity born of endless hours of white hot pain that Sato had called *plactice, plactice, plactice*, as he teased Horn with his pidgin send up. Moving with the fluidity that Sato said Round Eyes could not have, Horn's mother must have been a Hong Kong whore.

Moving with deceptive fluid slowness, bypassing Stetson's gun, executing the Four Corner Throw, that ended with Stetson's forearm and shoulder bent backward, *snap, crunch*, and the screaming started again, only this time it was good, lusty, human-pain-inflicted screaming.

And then something long and rubbery snaked into the room and *shoop*, Stetson disappeared like a sack of last week's garbage.

And then the "No" penetrated.

The sudden memory of 'Nam, and the child, he hadn't known her name either, went through him like a sweet breath of love.

*Remember me, Horn. I died, but you never forgot, you carried me in your heart all this time, and now you can do something, or you can let it happen again...*

Horn stood there in the center of the office, staring at the doorway to safety. Two steps and he'd be gone, racing down the street like Carl Lewis. Safe.

Horn went back into the corridor. Willfully, with full knowledge of his actions.

MD munched away, his amorphous, blob-shape sitting like a nightmarish Buddha at the end of the corridor. Horn saw Stetson's screaming eyes as he went down the hatch.

MD belched, or at least it sounded like it, and lurched forward.

Horn looked in the cell.

The kid looked out. Her eyes had the eerie serenity he had seen in the totally lobotomized, the truly religious, and at least one complete psycho he had met, and his fear of that matched his fear of MD.

Then she smiled. It transformed her, instantly, into something he could not name, but knew, in his heart, as he knew little else. "You came back," she said with soft wonder.

Something else penetrated Horn's thick skull. The wind. More than a breeze, it had begun as soon as MD appeared, and had increased, until it whipped down the corridor.

Horn glanced that way, toward the amorphous blob of MD, and saw -- *nothing*. He blinked. The *nothing* seemed like a spot on the edge of his vision, but it expanded as he watched. The light in the cell went out as the *nothing* engulfed it.

The wind increased. The door to the office slammed against the wall of the corridor. The *nothing* became larger still, sucking the screaming wind into it. Scattered papers flew by Horn, disappearing into the blackness. He felt as if he stood in a raging torrent, as the power of the wind nearly swept him away.

The Rift.

Sally had told the truth. The limitation of her power, of Horn's own ability to move in shadow, had been due to the nearness of the rift that sucked everything into it like a black hole.



Except, apparently, MD, who continued to move inexorably toward Horn, seemingly unaffected by the torrent.

Vaguely, Horn also became aware of more noise, shouting and movement from the office. But he had no time for that.

He grabbed the bars, breathing deep. Deeper. Concentrating as he had never before concentrated. Going down, down, down, like before, like the spear into the pool. But not to get away, this time. Not that at all.

The windows out front blew out, sending a stream of flying glass down the corridor, shredding Horn's back like lettuce. As the pain flowered, he simply let it go. *I have more important things to worry about.*

Searching...

Another lurch. MD moved real fast on his own turf, but like a glacier here.

The kid figured out his intent. "Oh, Jesus, get out. Get out!" she screamed. "Go on!"

Searching...

"OK, OK, I'm sorry, I didn't mean all those things I thought about you, just run, Goddammit! Run!"

Horn gathered his power. *Need more. More.* Going to the limits of his senses, seeing everything that was happening, hearing the kid, "Run, Jesus, get outta here, please!" What guts she had, Jesus Christ what guts and courage and caring and --

-- love --

igniting him like a nuclear reactor, the power ran through him like an electric current, and then he set it off, let out the piercing *kiai*, and wrenched the bars, felt the lock snap, heard the metal tear, and the door flew open as MD got him.

The tentacles grabbed him, tore at him, sucked at him, ripping skin from his torso.

He realized the door had come off in his hands. Heedless of the fiery pain and the shower of concrete chunks, he tossed it -- the thing must have weighed four hundred pounds -- threw it into the gaping maw like a piece of cardboard, and it

smashed into MD with a satisfying, pulpy sound. MD didn't let go of Horn, but he was really pissed off.

Horn sagged, totally spent. The tentacles drew him toward the slavering mouth of his old, dear friend, as the kid screamed again. Horn grabbed another set of bars, held for a second, but could not overcome the force of MD's hungry pull. Inexorably, he slid down the corridor.

MD loomed over him, grotesque, blubbery, eyeless, mouth gaping in wide welcome. Horn's fear drained away, leaving him feeling oddly peaceful.

A hand grabbed his. Then another.

He glanced up and saw Raphael, one hand holding the belt of a second man, who in turn had his feet hooked through the bars of a cell. With both hands he clutched Horn's outstretched arm. They hung there for a second, but then Horn began to slip from his grasp.

Horn saw the kid behind Raphael, holding his waist with one arm, as she clung to a set of bars.

Horn glanced at MD, who seemed to be deciding which of them he'd munch first.

As the tendons in Horn's shoulder began to separate, something tumbled through the doorway and slid down the corridor.

Sarah landed in an half sitting position, sliding down toward Muck Drippy's slavering mouth like Willie Mays stealing home, Stetson's .357 nestled in a solid combat grip in both hands. As she went by Horn she emptied the magazine into MD's looming excuse for a face.

Like Sally, on his own turf MD knew no peer; but here he could bleed like any dumb-ass monster. Gore splattered as six soft-nosed bullets punched a fist-sized hole in MD's head. A screeching sound louder than the wind announced MD's displeasure. He let go.

Horn reached out desperately, grasping at Sarah's collar, and hauled her in. They pulled them both back into the office, climbing against the gravity of the sucking,

roaring wind, as the rift spread wider. A big metal desk momentarily blocked the doorway, then buckled and came apart as it flew down the corridor, barely missing them as they clung like leeches to the bars.

Raphael hauled them all through the maelstrom at the door, and into the office. Horn's jacket had been wedged in a corner. Sarah grabbed it, knowing the useful ordnance that might be in it. The force of the wind lessened dramatically, but as they scrambled to safety, they heard the ominous rumble of cement and rebar giving way.

"It's swallowing the building!" shouted Raphael.

They staggered outside. On the dark, empty street, weeds grew up through the cracked sidewalk. This end of town looked pretty ugly. The holding facility hadn't been the only thing closed down. Boarded up storefronts, graffiti-scrawled walls and broken windows gave evidence of advanced urban decay. The streetlights glowed fitfully.

Across the street, the lights from the station house threw a harsh yellow glare. The building structure muted the sound of the shrieking wind, but then the walls began to shudder and shake. The roof started to collapse, first slowly, then all at once, a great, crashing tumble of concrete and girders. The walls began to sag inward, crumbling like a sandcastle in the dry desert wind as the edges of the rift slowly expanded.

The howling that Horn heard came from more than the music of the wind.

Sarah clutched him like a life preserver. "Joe, Joe, Joe."

Horn looked at Raphael. "We have to get out of here!"

Raphael nodded, staring at the place where the jail had been. Only a huge pit remained. Horn swayed, then crumpled to the ground. Sarah turned to Raphael. "Raphael, he's hurt! Bad!"

Horn shook his head, but his face had turned white. "Look!"

A long, gray-black tentacle appeared over the edge of the pit.

Raphael raised his arms, almost in a gesture of benediction. He breathed deeply, closed his eyes, and let out his breath.

Power rolled out of him. Power to heal, to destroy. Power to rend, and to bind.

Raphael's power flowed over the pit, and the rising form of Muck Drippy squashed like a bug, splattering green-red gore. The rumbling within, and the high, keening sound of wind being sucked into a bottomless hole, faded and ceased.

The rift closed with a soft rumble, and winked out of existence. Raphael slowly sank to his knees. His face showed deep lines, and his body, so magnificently muscled, shrunk and withered like that of an old man.

Horn looked in his eyes and saw that the life had been drained out of them. "Ralph."

Raphael smiled at Horn, and reached his hand to clasp Horn's. *"For I healed the traveler Tobias, and his father Tobit, and I bound the demon in the desert of Kush. And now I heal you, Horn, my brother."*

Horn felt power rush through him like an electric current, raising him up by the force of it. His muscles cracked as they knit and the torn and bloody skin healed.

Horn knelt beside Raphael, Sarah and Mitch and the kid beside them.

"Sally!" Sarah cried.

She stood a short distance away, clad in jeans and a blouse. Mitch approached her, but she stepped back, raising her hands. "No. You have no idea --"

Raphael turned his head and smiled at her. "I was right."

Mitch halted, looking at Sally, then Ralph.

"They were sorry they fucked with you, weren't they?"

Sally smiled tentatively then looked away.

"Sally," said Sarah. "You have power. Raphael is dying. Heal him!"

Sally shook her head. "I -- used it all. Back there. Not when I fought the scum. I knew you needed help at the top of the stairs, and I couldn't get there. Here, as I have said, my power was limited. I used it to call -- another, whom I have called before. The only friend I ever had in the Borderland. It was he who saved you, up there." Sally looked at Sarah. "He went willingly, knowing his fate." She looked down at her feet. "I have nothing, now."

"You have me," said Mitch.

She looked up, fear in her eyes. "You don't know -- who I am..."

Mitch nodded. "That's right. And guess what? I don't care. Only thing I care about is you're the best thing ever happened to me, and I'd give anything to have you."

"Even your humanity?" she whispered.

"Yeah," Mitch said without hesitation. "Even that. I ain't blind and I ain't stupid. I got some idea what -- who you are. I'm a big boy. I can make my own decisions and live with 'em. You're mine, in case you forgot." He paused. "That guy you sent. He told me to take care of you. I intend to."

Sally looked at him with eyes that had been lost for three thousand years. Her lips trembled and her hands shook. She looked back to Raphael.

He reached out a hand. "Come, child."

As docile as a six-year-old, Sally knelt before Raphael.

He took her hand. "I know who you are, child, even better than these others. I know your sins. I also know that you have sacrificed much to help others. I know that you have truly repented. In the name of our Father, I forgive you."

Sally looked at him as if he had spoken an alien language.

"Now you have to find out if you can forgive yourself."

Sally rose, backing away as if in fear, shaking her head. She looked at each of the others, then finally, at Mitch. She went to him, slowly, and sank to her knees. Without looking up she said in a low voice. "I -- I --" She took a breath and started again. "Will you have me, Master, as your willing slave?"

Mitch bit his lip, hard, holding something back. "I'll have you any way you want to be with me, woman."

Sally's eyes closed and she seemed to sigh, as if a titanic weight had been lifted from her. "Then I shall be yours, your slave."

Mitch took her in his arms.

"Who's that?" asked the kid, looking at Horn.

"An old friend." He looked at Raphael. "I also have some sins that need --"

"It wasn't you, Joe," Raphael said in a weak voice. "It was Fred. He opened the rift, in 'Nam. Not meaning to, I expect, but you know some of the things he did. Enough evil will cause that to happen. I looked for it for years, but it moved around, sometimes it just disappeared. Then, when he settled here, it moved here. To be near the source of great evil."

"It moved?" asked Sarah.

"Yeah," said Horn, understanding at last. "The reason Ralph couldn't find it. Someone who knew him real well was pulling the strings."

"Lucifer," Raphael whispered. "My brother --" Then Raphael paused, lifting his head slightly. "Listen, Joe. Can you hear it? The voices of the dead?"

Joe listened. They all did.

The kid's eyes got wide. "It's -- it's like -- singing!"

"They're going home," whispered Raphael.

For a minute, they all listened to the sound of voices on the wind, flowing through them all and leaving a trace of sadness for each life gone, a trace of hope for each spirit saved.

"Time for me to go home, too." Raphael turned to Sarah and Joe. "There's no time to tell you what needs to be said. Remember that I love you both." He closed his eyes momentarily, as he grew weaker. "Where I come from, that counts -- for something," he whispered. "Oh, yeah." Raphael nodded toward Sarah. "She's the best fuck I ever had. How much I owe you?"

Horn's face betrayed something lost and hopeful at once. "For you, buddy, she's always free. Always."

Raphael smiled and closed his eyes. Horn kissed him softly. After a minute, he stood. Sarah gasped. Mitch crossed himself.

Raphael had gone home.

## Chapter Ten

They all stood silently for a minute. Then Horn turned to Mitch. "I don't know you, but based on what happened here, you have a good pedigree."

Mitch smiled and shook Horn's hand. "I guess I can say the same, if that woman thinks you're worth goin' after," he said, nodding at Sarah. "You ever need somethin', the name's Mitch Davis. I live outside Marshall, east side of Illinois. The door's always open for you. I still got my rig to look after, assumin' I can find it." He shook his head. "C'mon, woman, let's get goin'."

Sally hooked a finger through Mitch's belt and followed him down the empty street. In a minute they turned a corner and were gone.

Horn took the kid's hand and he and Sarah led her away from there. The kid hobbled a little but kept up. Eventually he felt the Shift, the subtle change that meant they had come back into the real world.

*If that's what it is,* Horn thought.

After a while they stopped. Up ahead, the lights of a diner offered stark welcome.

Horn still trembled from exhaustion and reaction. The kid looked worse. They needed food. Calories.

Before Horn could speak, she shrank close to him, and then she hugged him fiercely, bawling like an eight-year-old, letting something out for the first time in God knew how long.

Horn held her in silence and let her snuffle all over his nice green jacket. Sarah smiled and put her arm around Horn's waist and leaned her head against his shoulder.

After a while the kid subsided to shuddering, *ga ga* sounds. He stroked her hair, and held her tight for a while longer, until she was quiet and his own tears had dried.

"My name," she sniffed hard, her voice muffled in the jacket, "my name is Mary Louise Stoddard."

"Joe Horn. This is Sarah Fenton."

Mary stepped back, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. Nodded toward Sarah. "Hi." Then she looked toward the diner. "You got any money?"

He rummaged through the jacket. They hadn't found the hidden pocket. Fifties and twenties and some smaller stuff. About six hundred. He nodded. "We're flush."

\* \* \*

"Now what?" Mary asked. She sat across from Horn, next to Sarah, who looked at her more maternally than their age difference probably justified, but the kid had been through a lot.

Empty plates. Empty glasses. Full stomachs.

*Life is different on a full stomach.*

The diner was sort of a dive, but they couldn't complain. Sarah and Mary looked dirty and disheveled, and Horn looked worse. The jacket looked bad, but it made him almost presentable.

His instincts said to just head on down the road again, no sense trying to alert anyone to what had happened. The authorities hereabouts were unlikely to be sympathetic. For all he knew, Fred had some friends, after all.

Mary had picked up on all that pretty quick. She had stopped shaking, and didn't say a thing as they came in and got a booth way in the back, next to the emergency exit. Just waited, never taking her eyes off the windows, until Horn said, "I think he's dead. And maybe most of his friends. Closing the rift shut off the connection they need to exist in this world."

Mary gave him a hard look. "That isn't just a load of crap to make me sleep better, is it?"

Horn smiled and shook his head. "I felt it when it happened. I'm pretty sure --"

Mary just stared at him for a moment, then visibly relaxed. "Yeah. I can sort of tell these things, too, but I wasn't too sure about this. It was just... too weird."



He looked around. Force of habit. "Where do you live?" Not really expecting an answer.

She stiffened. Alert now, to his every nuance. He waited, slurping the remains of his chocolate malt. He was a sucker for chocolate malts. And big-eyed girls. MD better be dead. Because his days of living on the street were definitely over.

Mary looked out the window again, then back at him, but not at him. At his hard, gnarly hands, resting on the table. She reached out and touched them, gingerly, with both of hers. "My mom died. Like I said. I never knew my dad." She shrugged, and continued looking at his hands.

Sarah frowned a little, watching her intently.

"She never called me Mary Lou, the way other people did. She said my dad liked the name Mary, and her mom was named Louise, so that was where she got the name Mary Louise, but she only called me Mary."

She looked up at Horn, then, at which point he started to get it.

She pulled out a faded, crumpled photo. "When I lost my first tooth, Mom told me about the Tooth Fairy. I put the tooth under my pillow and the Tooth Fairy left me a quarter. I was so excited, I figured I'd really hit on something. And the next night I put this under my pillow, and when I woke in the morning and we were still alone, that's when I stopped believing in the Tooth Fairy. I never believed in Santa Claus, either. Or God." She paused, looking out the window. "Until tonight."

She looked at the photo. "For some reason I still believed in this. Like maybe the reason my wish hadn't been granted was the Tooth Fairy's fault." She laid the photo on the table for Horn to see, but he looked at her instead.

Sarah stared at both of them, alarm in her eyes. Then dawning realization. Her mouth opened, but she said nothing.

"About a year ago, I woke up in the middle of the night. It was, like, three in the morning. I looked out my bedroom window and saw the moon riding a cloud. And this little voice in my head said 'Go'." She shrugged. "So I did. I left my foster parents a note, and walked out."

Horn had been a lot of places in his years on the run. They tended to run together in his mind. The people, MD's victims, ran together, too. But a few of them stood out. Sharon had been one. For one thing, she'd survived. "How --" He stopped and tried again. "How did she -- die?"

"Breast cancer," Mary said. "About four years ago." Pause. "I really miss her."

Horn did, too. He hadn't wanted to leave that time. But he knew there was no way. No way. He opened his mouth, wondering what he could possibly say, as he realized what Mary had been screaming, back there in the jail.

"I live here," she'd said. Tapping the photo.

\* \* \*

They caught an early morning bus headed west, toward San Diego. As the sun rose behind them, with Sarah and Mary sitting on either side of him in the back row, he took Sarah's hand. She smiled at him, then at Mary, who slept like a log with her head on Horn's shoulder.

A line from Frost came to Horn. ...*For I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep...*

*Stuff it, Bob.* He leaned back in his seat, closed his eyes, and dreamed of home.

## Epilogue

On the wide veranda of the rambling wood, stone and glass house that looked out over the dark, calm waters of Castillian Bay, Sarah sweated in the balmy Caribbean night. She moaned with sensuous hunger, humping her nude body off the thick cushion of the double lounge. Leather straps bound her wrists to the corners.

With one hand Horn stroked her gently, slowly, taking his time. He treated her casually, because his feigned indifference excited her as nothing else could.

She whimpered. "Please! Fuck me now! I can't wait!"

"Your voice carries in the night," he whispered. "They'll hear you down in the town. Everyone will know you're begging me to fuck you."

"God, Joe, I don't care! Fuck me!"

"Not yet," he whispered in a sinister voice. "I want to play with your body for a while."

She moaned again. "Oh, God, please! I want it! Please!"

"That's what I like to hear." He knelt beside her, nude in the tropic night. "I'm stroking my own cock, slave. Teasing myself with the thought of how it will feel to fuck your luscious body. But you don't hear *me* begging, because I am in control. You have no control. None. You're a helpless slave. Your body is mine to use, isn't it?"

"Yes, Master!" She gasped as his fingers stroked her clit, lightly, then stiffened and penetrated her like a cock, stroking her from within. She moved to the rhythm of his hand. "Oh! Master, please fuck me!"

The whimpering cry of a small child rose in the background.

Sarah stiffened. Horn leaned down and whispered, "It's just Sharon. Mary will take care of her."

But Sarah had already resumed her writhing sex dance.

"Lift your legs and spread them, slave," Horn hissed, feeling his hunger about to overtake him.

She lifted her legs and split them in a vee, holding them up like twin muscular spears.

"That's right," Horn murmured, caressing her with his gravelly voice. "Now you're being a good girl."

Sarah bared her teeth in a savage grin. "Use me, you stud! Use me!"

Horn heard a sleepy muttered curse and soft movement in the east wing, across the wooden walkway. The walkway spanned a long pool that was fed by a small, clear stream at one end. The water drained out the other end where it tumbled over the cliff and splashed down the mountainside in a silver feather. The wing had been intended for guests, but lately had become the nursery.

He moved between Sarah's legs, dipping his head to suck her clit.

"Oh, God, yes!" she cried as she came almost immediately. "Yes!"

He made her come three more times, carefully controlling her body, teasing her with his hands as he relentlessly stroked her clit with his tongue. Then he rose up and drove his cock into her. "Who owns you, slave?"

She arched, throwing her head back, grunting and moaning incoherently, coming again and again as his lustful use of her set off multiple orgasms. "You! God, you! You own me! You own me!"

Horn came with complete, intense focus on his pleasure, and on Sarah, whose lithe, sexy body seemed to him to be the epitome of passionate beauty. As he always did -- now -- he thought of nothing except the blissful feeling of oneness with her.

He released her bonds and lay on his back, staring at the white ceiling of the veranda, content and relaxed. Five hundred feet below, the surf murmured quietly, just discernible over the faint sound of a steel band.

Sarah rolled onto her side and snuggled against him, sighing happily. She lay with her head on his scarred chest and gently stroked his cock. "I love you and your cock."

"I'll bet you say that to all the boys."

She smiled, remembering. "Yes. I do."

The night breeze moved softly across the veranda and through the house.

"I hope you're happy," said Mary in a tart voice. She stood at the doorway into the common room, wrapped in a silk robe and holding Sharon, who stared vacantly with sleepy eyes. Mary grimaced at Sarah. "Geez, you make enough noise to wake the dead."

Sarah stuck out her tongue then sat up and held out her arms.

Mary's grimace became a lopsided smile as she handed the three-year-old to Sarah, who gathered her in, cooing like any doting grandma. Nude, voluptuous and covered with sweat, but a grandma nonetheless. At least by proxy.

Mary's partner Jennifer appeared in the doorway, clad only in pajama bottoms, looking much less cranky and more awake. Her short blond hair and slight build made them look like sisters.

Thank God they decided to have Jen carry the baby, thought Sarah, who couldn't imagine how they would have survived if Mary had been the one with morning sickness.

"I see the shameless hussy is corrupting the morals of our minor," said Jennifer. She wrapped one arm around Mary's waist, stroked her short brown hair and kissed her lightly on the neck. Mary seemed immediately less sulky and leaned into the other girl. They watched in silence for a few minutes as Sharon pulled at Sarah's damp hair and mumbled sleepy toddler talk.

"OK, little nit," said Jennifer. "Time to get back to bed. You got a big day tomorrow -- today, I mean. Shells to gather, birds to count. Come on, you."

Sarah reluctantly handed Sharon back to her birth mother and settled back into the curve of Joe's arm.

Jennifer smiled at Mary and then at Joe and Sarah. "You guys didn't wake her, although I'm kind of surprised. She had a nightmare, that's all." She arched one eyebrow at Mary and carried Sharon back into the house, murmuring quietly to her.

Leaning against the doorframe with her arms crossed, Mary watched them go, smiling at last. She turned and blew Joe and Sarah a kiss. "G'night Sarah. Night, Dad."

Alone again, Horn held Sarah close, breathing her scent. Across the house, he heard Jennifer murmuring to Sharon. "It's OK, sweetheart. It was only a nightmare. The monsters aren't real."

Stroking Sarah's hair, Horn closed his eyes and smiled.

*Anymore.*

## **Jonathan Wright**

By day, Jonathan Wright disguises himself as an ordinary middle-aged insurance underwriter. He lives on the East Coast with his wife and daughter, both of whom believe him to be supremely cool, though slightly deranged.

In pursuit of his career as a horror/romance/comedy writer, JW strives to expand his experiences, in order to relate them to his readers with authenticity. Skulking through everyday life is not enough for JW, no, he pushes the envelope (and everyone's buttons). He calls this "research."

Their dog, Rex, thinks this is all great fun. The two cats, who have unique and appropriate names, but do not answer to them, and are therefore both known simply as "Cat," could care less. His wife generally forgives him, as long as he remembers to take out the trash.