

HOAD'S GRIM

EDITION 1
"THE AUDIOBOOK DRAMA VERSION"

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BY JACK KINCAID

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Hoad's Grim is not real.

But the gibgoblins *are*.

Look in your heart.

PROLOGUE

SUTTON VALLEY, NEW YORK

*

"From beyond the door
came the chatter of bones,
the remains of those coaxed
to black ends in that beastly
hollow, that place of
darkness and teeth.

Oh how they hunger
in that terrible grim."

--*The Gibgoblins*,
By Ed Hoad

*

The cycles ended forever in November of 1956.

A gallon of gas cost twenty-three cents. Minimum wage paid three quarters. The Soviets just ended the uprising in Hungary, Eisenhower was reelected, Elvis Presley was huge, and Ed Phillip Hoad was routinely stewed to the hat on whiskey, the only remaining fuel for his faulty inner engines.

He knew he had a drinking problem, just as he knew that he had voices that demanded to be heard through his work. They were parts of the same animal that, when left to hunger, lashed out in red bursts that frightened his wife. Frightened

even him. *They* extorted him for years, condemning him to refuel the engines and conduct *their* business, a bitter and lonely business in a dim office with closed doors. They ate at whatever they could. The love in his marriage. His time with his son Gary, who deserved the attentive father Ed never had.

Ed had grown tired of being governed by the things in his inner places and seeing the outer world through a haze. They always coaxed him back to their will, scared him, tricked him, rewired his mind and memory. They wouldn't be denied. He had to feed them. He didn't know how not to.

Until two months ago when the writing stopped.

Whether it was due to his marital turmoil, the failure of his second book, or because he had become conscious of the cycles that plagued his life, Ed didn't know. Words could not find their way out of the noise in his mind. He stared at nothing while time passed and a page in the typewriter remained blank.

His debt was growing. He had lost his job at the *Sutton Valley Gazette*, was in danger of losing his house on the hill at 34 Saybrook Road, and was trying to swallow the terrible pill that Barbara might have left him for good.

Two weeks with no sign of her.

He dealt with it the only way he knew how. If there's stress, relieve it by any means. If there's pain, take medicine. If it gets worse, up the dosage. Common sense.

He was heavily oiled the morning he glanced out the window and saw an unfamiliar car on the shady cul-de-sac. The black Ford sat in front of his house, its round headlights staring over the chrome grimace of the grille, the seats empty.

The leaf-covered pavement continued on past the home of the Morgans, pretty Betty and her brawny trash-mouth of a husband Roy, who was washing his '48 Oldsmobile.

Ed shambled to the window. He heard Pat Boone singing

on the radio about how he almost lost his mind and heard the TV that he had just seen his son playing near, setting up a camp of army men on the carpet.

"What did I tell you about having both those things on." Ed didn't look back. "Pick one or the other, son. Unless you wanna pay for the 'lectricity."

"The radio's not on, Pa."

"My ears don't lie, so shut it off already."

He braced a hand on the window frame, leaned, and peered toward the cape house next door, a modest home for the family of a money man like Henry Boggs.

Beside the jutting back fenders of a new Caddy, Henry held a rake and talked to a man in a long coat and hat. He jotted notes on a pad. When the man glanced through his thick-framed glasses, Ed recognized him as John Broward, the detective who had stopped by many times since Ed reported Barbara missing.

Only this time Broward had come to see *his neighbors*. Ed didn't like that any more than their faces which showed nothing favorable as they kept glancing toward his house.

"I need to talk to a man outside, son." Ed swiveled his head toward Gary who was belly-down on the floor in his pajamas, dark bangs hanging down to his brows. "Be a good boy and stay put. Play with your soldiers till I get back."

"My soldiers," he agreed.

"You hear me?"

"Yes, Pa." His voice was distant, dreamy, and he didn't look at Ed, which might have made Ed sore if he wasn't so taken by the sight of his child playing, imagining, dreaming as creative children dream.

A smile crept up, but didn't spread to his eyes.

They were too haunted by the sight of this ghost.

Your soldiers, yes they are. You still own the dreams, my boy. God, don't you ever become like your old man. Don't grow

up to let them own you.

Barefoot, clad in a shirt and trousers he had slept in twice, Ed went out onto the porch where the light met him harshly. His hair was unkempt, grown out from his usual flat-top. Tufts of it hooked down against his forehead in commas.

Henry freed a hand from his cardigan sweater, straightened his cap, and made a motion that prompted Broward to turn.

Speak of the devil and the devil appears, Ed thought.

Broward grinned and waved.

Ed did neither. He waited.

When Broward approached, Ed leaned against a column.

Brown hat, charcoal coat, Broward peered up through his glasses. "Mister Hoad," he said with his nasal voice that sounded deceptively passive. "I was about to give a rap on your door."

His smile and so-happy-to-see-you tone made Ed wonder.

"Have you found her?" Ed asked.

"I'm afraid not," he said, the sympathy in his voice too great to believe. "Frankly, everyone's very concerned."

"No one more than I."

"Of course." Broward gave a wistful smile, and Ed didn't believe in that either. "It saddens me when I think of your son. A child needs its mother. This must be very hard on him."

"His dog ran away. Then his mother too. If I didn't care for her, I might say they were from the same stock. But the boy is holding up. Better than I am. I don't have his strength."

"If you don't mind my saying so..."

Ed waved a permitting hand.

"I can tell you that you smell like a saloon. And I'm not even downwind." Broward fiddled with his hat when Ed said

nothing. "We all deal..." Pausing, he looked pensive and Ed knew why. Men who stopped to choose words had different dialogue in mind. "With things our own way. Things we could have done. Things we did." There it was. "Your son will need you more than ever now. Perhaps you shouldn't go to the bottle so much."

"It calms the devils."

"Devils?" Broward blinked twice. "Mister Hoad?"

Ed supposed that stopping to choose words was an example he should follow. "Every man's got them."

Broward nodded slowly. "And some men have dark halves too."

"Some men hide them. Man is evil. Inherently. If you think William Golding was whistling Dixie, you don't watch the news."

"William who?"

"It doesn't matter. Because we're not really talking about philosophy or literature anyway, are we?"

Broward sighed. "Mister Hoad--"

"Don't Mister-Hoad me. I know where you're driving this conversation to and I... resent it." Ed met his eyes, those dark studious spotters beneath his hat brim. "You're talking to my neighbors and shaking my tree to see... if rotten apples fall. I know how the world works. I know you're doing your job. Because I respect that, I saw to it we wouldn't be on bad terms, as I could not forgive being insulted in my own house."

"You never invited me in."

"And I just told you why."

Broward opened his mouth, as if to retort, and snapped it shut. "That's fair." He cleaned his glasses with a handkerchief that he plucked from his coat. "You must admit that these are suspicious circumstances. I find it very curious that she took nothing when she left. Not her clothes. Her gloves or coat." He blinked and slipped his glasses back on.

"Her purse."

"It is odd, yes."

Broward flipped through notes. "When she disappeared, Gary was at school and you were napping."

Ed nodded and didn't clarify that he hadn't napped exactly but drank himself into the black.

"Between ten and noon."

"Twelve, twelve-thirty. Yes."

"Betty Morgan..." Broward gestured down the cul-de-sac. "Was outside gardening and should have witnessed Barbara leaving. Surely your Barbara wouldn't have gone through the woods."

Ed licked his lips. "Betty must have missed her, because somebody got the mail."

"The mail?"

Ed flagged out an arm. "Mailboxes are out on the street. Barbara always got the mail. The box was empty when I checked."

"You checked the mailbox?" Broward looked enlightened. "Were you expecting anything? A payment for your work, perhaps."

"No."

"I presume you must be paid fairly well in order to--"

"Writers don't get rich. They get burned." Ed wanted another drink now. "They burn up. Or burn out."

"Perhaps there was no mail. It happens." Broward crossed his arms, tapping his notepad against a shoulder. "Now, if a car, say a salesman, had come, wouldn't you say that Betty would have noticed? That Martha Boggs next door would have heard it?"

Ed pegged them as trick questions and shrugged.

"The Boggs *have* heard arguments between you and your wife."

"No marriage is perfect." Ed put a clamp on his emotions. "There were things she wanted from me that she didn't think she was getting. So maybe she went to get them someplace else."

"Yes, the wayward theory."

"Call it what you want."

"The Sifts insist that Barbara would not have dropped contact with them. Have you talked at all with--"

"No, but you already knew that. They think I'm no good for her." Ed hadn't believed that until recently. "We don't talk."

"They have this... very crazy idea that you might have done something to her."

The words entered his mind and looped there as some things did, like plot ideas or radio jingles or that damned *Mr. Sandman* song from the *Chordettes*.

(--might have done something to her, you might have--)

"I'd never."

"Are you sure you were napping?"

(Are you sure, are you sure...)

"Yes."

"It is crazy, isn't it?" Broward said, deadpan.

"If your eyes could see in my heart, you'd know it is."

Broward tilted his head back, pausing, and brought it back down, completing a nod. "Well spoken." His eyes lowered, and rose. "But as you said, men have dark sides."

Ed heaved a sigh.

"Some hide it, but not always. You choose your moments."

You presuppose that I have a choice, Ed didn't say.

"You certainly don't hide it in your work."

Ed had a feeling it might come to that. "Am I supposed to feel embarrassed now for writing rubbish?"

"Your words. Not mine."

"I know what some people say."

Broward paused. "I had a look at one of your books."

"Now should I be impressed that you *read* my rubbish?"

"I had to ask myself a very relevant question."

"Very is your favorite qualifier."

"What can be said of a person who writes such stories?"

"Anything at all."

"I'm very sorry if I have offended you in any way,"

Broward said, but his tone said *I know I am offending you and I am doing it on purpose*. "I just find it fascinating actually.

Why someone would elect to write stories about--"

"*I didn't* elect them." Ed regretted the edge that entered his voice as he saw Broward raise an eyebrow. "They elected me."

Broward looked puzzled. "The book was called..." He consulted his notes. "The Jas-manglers."

"Jasm-anglers," Ed muttered.

Broward looked up. "What is a jasmangler exactly?"

"I thought you read it."

"No." He sounded shocked by the implication, as if he had been asked if he ever put on a tutu and licked a monkey's ass. "I prefer lighter reading. Yours was dark. I found it disturbing. I had to put it down. I can't say I liked it."

"The critics didn't either." Ed rolled his eyes. "The New York Times said it was murdered by metaphors."

"You should also know that I find the dark overtones of this conversation disturbing too."

"You started it and now I'm gonna finish it." Ed headed for the door. "Have yourself a *very* good day."

He heard Broward say, "We'll talk again," and had no doubt.

Ed returned to the living room where army men prepared for battle and Gary was nowhere in sight, probably upstairs in

his room to get reinforcements.

"Say kids," Buffalo Bob said on the TV, *"what time is it?"*

It was Howdy Doody Time, of course, and that freckly-faced marionette gave Ed the creeps, maybe because he identified with him too well. Booze was Ed's Buffalo Bob, the strings his cycles and muses, the puppeteers the things inside that moved him. Without Buffalo Bob, Howdy Doody had no voice. Without the puppet strings: no motion. Take away that and Ed supposed the peanut gallery would still cheer and giggle their heads off. But there would be nothing *happy* about those sounds. They would be mad. *Hungry*. If Howdy Doody and his cousin Heidi and Mister Bluster just lay around, drained of magic, Ed imagined the little devils would rush off the bleachers and rip up the citizens of Doodyville for the entertainment they weren't getting.

"You think you're special now," he spoke to the TV, which for Ed Hoad was not unusual. "Poor little guy." He leaned, almost toppling. "Howdy Doody Time won't last forever." He shut it off. "They'll find some other puppet..."

He shuffled into the kitchen, where he stopped at the sight of his upright freezer that he had come to think of as a symbol of everything wrong in his life.

After Henry Boggs bought a freezer and Martha gabbed to Barbara about it, Barbara wanted one. Ed scoffed at the idea whenever she brought it up, at the same time saving up the money.

The freezer looked new, which helped keep his secret that he had bought it used. Months later, he didn't feel as clever. It was a power hog, glitchy, and no bargain. He wished he had listened to Barbara when she argued it should go in the garage. It made the kitchen feel cluttered. It stood out there, didn't belong there, but he had his say and there it went where visitors could see it. Stubborn pride on display.

What's the point of having a luxury nobody knows you

have? was his argument, but Ed had had plans for it.

He didn't want it far from his office.

He preferred his liquor cold. If it came down to survival, he would take his hooch warm and poured from a used ashtray as readily as he would eat bread off a dirty floor. But he loved it cold. From the bottle-neck. Not with rocks that would melt and water it down. Not in a glass he would have to refill. His ability to concentrate had become precarious, frayed by such little things as his liquor going lukewarm or refilling a glass.

He used to keep two bottles in the freezer, sandwiched between the TV dinners and Wonder Cake or ice cream, and swapped them now and then as he answered the calls of his bladder, a distraction for which there was no remedy but relief. He had connected his work, cold booze, and that freezer, threaded them together and tied himself into a knot.

As he stared at it now, he thought of the whiskey that lay beside the Thanksgiving turkey that wouldn't be cooked this year. If he saw the bottle, the feel-good memory of cold liquor down his gullet would spark a demand. *Then* he would end up behind the typewriter with a cramping brain that produced no words and angry muses who would start eating him up again.

He didn't want that. He didn't want a drink either, as he was already tanked. He didn't want to open the freezer.

That's where his demons were.

He felt them pulling.

Resisting the movers when they yanked his strings sometimes felt as if he was yanking back and drawing *them* closer. The fear that brought him, however irrational, usually made him cave. When his resolve held, they conspired to make him forget it and spoke in one united voice through a door in his imagination.

You don't really believe you can change. To what end? So you can be a better man for Barbara? You jest. But there's no

point in trying now. She's gone. Your work is all that's left. Get to it. Open the door.

Ed did not trust that voice.

However persuasive, it was deceptive. It was the addict voice of the watchers and movers in his inner darkness. The masters of his illusions. Parts of himself that had gone cannibal.

The gibgoblins in his personal Grim.

Like those creatures from his first book, they could not reach him, much less gnaw, if he stayed clear of their door.

Drawing that parallel might not have come natural to a man who didn't think in metaphors or who wasn't a writer, a superstitious animal that made baseball players with rituals seem mild by comparison, but Ed was both.

"Never again." He felt betrayed by the lack of conviction in his voice. Doubts descended, black clouds behind his bloodshot eyes, and he thought, *Who am I kidding?*

The thought of the liquor inside that had to be cold, so wonderfully cold, intoxicated him and he advanced, his eyes filled with desire, the first steps across the checkered floor urgent. Closer.

PAIN jabbed his foot.

Cursing, he squinted down at what he had stepped on. He crouched and saw it was an army man--kneeling with a bazooka.

"Damn that boy. How many times..."

Ed stopped and considered *how many times* he had stepped out of his cycles, battled them hard only to throw it away at a weak moment and find himself back at square one.

He had come just as close other times in the past two weeks. *It's become a cycle of its own.* He laughed at the absurdity. He had laughed the other times too, but they were *sad* laughs, because the only thing worse than living life like a skipping record was being fully aware of it.

He told himself that if the soldier hadn't jolted him out of the trance, *the fear* would have.

Ever since the last hallucination that had seemed frighteningly real, he had feared that it would happen again. Days before Barbara disappeared, he had opened the freezer while his eyes yawed drunkenly elsewhere. A mindless ritual, he would reach in and grab for the bottle.

That time he had groped at nothing but cold air.

His eyes had widened when they looked into the freezer, an impossible window to a black abyss where frost clouds drifted and formless things swam and struggled to take shape, the origin of the low snarling voice which said:

"You left us hungry and we'll have to find something else to eat. We'll have to eat you up instead. Eat you from the inside out. And you'll be inside us instead. We'll be you and you'll be us because what we eat is what we are."

Ed had slammed the door with a cry that summoned Barbara. He never told her and hadn't opened the freezer since.

That had been the first time he consciously thought of the gibgoblins in context with the freezer and his writing, which was solidified by the nightmare he had that same night.

He had dreamt that he had gone into his office and the air was hazed with smoke. Smelling sweet and spicy, it came from the warped pipe of the leprechaun who sat in his chair in its traditional green garb, booted feet up on the desk.

"Find the magic in the stout," the leprechaun had said between puffs. "Keep your skin. You're inside out."

Keep drinking and writing had been Ed's interpretation, and there was no doubting the meaning of *inside out*. His insides were full of monsters. No matter how well caged, sooner or later they broke out. Words on a page, explosions of temper, hallucinations, whatever the means, whatever the

shape, the monsters found their way out.

Ed walked into his office. The door opened in beside his bar and a painting of his father. Book shelves flanked the room and his desk faced away from windows that looked into the forest.

He settled into his chair and grabbed his whiskey bottle off the desk, where he had left it beside his Underwood typewriter. He brought the bottle to his lips, tipped it, and stopped.

"Enough." He dropped the bottle in the waste basket.

He looked out the window for a long while, staring through the trees. He thought of how Gary liked to play with his army men in the dirt of the side yard, and thought of the house.

His eyes widened a notch and he stared *at* the trees.
Wood.

He doubted anyone stopped to consider that they made their homes inside the mutilated remains of another life form, the corpses of trees, as if living in houses of bones. He had read stories about haunted bones, often the bones of bad people. Evil bones. Now he contemplated wood from evil trees. What made them evil? Surely the same thing that made people evil. The environment in which they grew.

The dirt from which they derived nourishment.

From tainted grounds, desecrated grounds, it didn't matter. He had enough to start with. His world changed in seconds, filled with confidence and hope where there had been none. He knew that he could draft a great book from that premise, one that would surpass the success of *The Gibgoblins* and lessen his debt.

Ed had the world in his hands again.

Lines of text forming in his head, Ed produced a stack of pages from a desk drawer and fed one into the typewriter. He lit a cigar, a task of many steps yet mindless. Once his hands

were free, he pounded out the opening lines.

The machine-gun clack of the typewriter and *ching!* of the carriage return were good sounds. Good magic.

He scanned the text.

Behind his eyes the next line formed and he held it there in the mental womb as he reached--

--for nothing.

The magic stopped, record skipped again, and he stared at the corner of his desk where he had reached for...

I don't need it. There's no magic in the stout. No magic. It's already here. It's inside.

His eyes yawed to the side, looked inside for that next sentence which was now gone, and fixed on the page. He told himself he would remember if he reread what he had written, but that was not there either. Instead...

Col *Dwhiske* yifo Rgotth Ecoldw hisk eya ndic
 annotwor kw Ithouta Coldd rink ".Ia", *ma.b adpu* ppctfor,
 eve ntr ying toa ba dbadpu *ppctfo* rno tge ttin gmy
 coldw. Hi ske youtofth ef Reezer, ica nnotw rit Ewitho
 Utitic Annotwr.

Ed revolted from it, stumbled back into the wall between the windows. The magic was gone, the excitement of his new inspiration dim, the enthusiasm a ghost, the typewriter no longer his friend, and he wanted it all back.

He wanted it now.

The flames of that desire consumed him and he stormed into the kitchen. He wrenched open the freezer door. He snatched out the bottle that was frosty and welcome in his warm hands. The whiskey was sure to be slushy and robbed of flavor, but it was cold and it had his medicine.

With a manic grin, he returned to his desk where his

cigar burned. He wrestled with the bottle cap and looked at the page he had started, seeing:

The Indians told Robert Mauwer that the land westward of Saffron Creek was "bad", the soil tainted, but the land was no longer theirs and the land was cheap. It now belonged to Robert, who owned the Mauwer Lumber Company.

"Yes..."

When he raised the bottle, the next line of text returned from the darkness in perfect condition. He brought the bottle to his lips... and stopped.

"The ancient trees there would soon come down," he said the line, which was simple, logical, unremarkable.

His voice of reason came.

You mean to tell me that you have to drink that in order to type the ancient trees there would soon come fucking down? Do you know how absurd that is? And by the way, the words came back and you haven't had a swig yet.

He picked up his cigar, puffed thoughtfully, eyes moving between the typewriter and the bottle.

What you have on the page isn't all that remarkable either.

His face writhed into a grimace. He shoved the cigar through the bottleneck, into his cold well of spirits, and it joined the whiskey with a sizzle.

One eye twitching, he shook the bottle crazily and lobbed it. It hurtled toward the portrait of his father, a stage actor who had committed suicide, and crashed in a flurry of shards and dirty liquor. "I don't need you!" He meant it.

How many times have we dumped out a bottle or smashed it? How many times have we thought we meant it? How many? How many?

He looked at the typewriter.

What he saw on the page--*once again*--knocked every door inside him off their hinges.

It sent him into a screaming rampage. He picked up the typewriter and hurled it into the shelves. It crashed to the floor, books spilled down, and he seized it again. It smashed into the bar next. Bottles jangled, distracting him, and he smashed them all, on the counter, against the wall, flung them like bombs, laughing madly all the while.

His hand wrenched the page from the typewriter, stuffed it in his mouth, and he *chewed* while he punished the typewriter.

Finally, he carried the maimed thing toward a window. He stopped. A better idea popped out from the fires behind his eyes and he stormed into the kitchen with it.

"You can have it!"

He flung open the freezer door and drove the typewriter in, the slice of his mind still functioning expecting to have to jam it between shelves, but the freezer led to *the black place* again.

The typewriter sailed into the darkness and Ed almost went with it. He caught himself, gazing into The Grim while hot piss flowed down his legs, unaware that he was still laughing and that he was a bloody mess from cutting himself on bottle shards.

(Come on in. The water's fine!)

Things stirred and giggled beyond the frosty door, and he knew what he would find at the bottom of their darkness. That would be just fine. If he was wrong and his eyes lied, he had a gun that would do the job splendidly.

I end it now.

If he didn't, he might not ever. He might calm down, feel better for a while, but then it would be more of *the same*. He

never believed in spirits that carried on or in Heaven, but he *did* believe in *Hell*. He had been living there for years uncounted. The flames may have been metaphorical, the pain and suffering inside instead of out, but those things weren't what made Hell what it was as much as endless repetition.

The last remnant of the man inside the monster conjured the image of Gary. He locked up, trembling violently in indecision.

"*Gary's gone*," said his voice from across the kitchen, and he looked. Bloody, crazed, wide eyes set in dark circles, he saw himself. "He's dead and you know it."

"What, no, he's upstairs, Gary's upstairs..."

"All that noise would have brought him down. We both know what happened. We took care of him. Oh yes, we did."

"No."

"I'm afraid so." Another voice made Ed snap his head toward the office doorway. Detective Broward stood there in his charcoal coat and hat. "Some have dark sides, Mister Hoad."

(--*might have done something to her, might have--*)

"We took care of Barbara too," his dark side said.

"Napping. That's good. Let's drink some more alibis. They're all free in your *house of bones*, brother. Let's drink it all!"

Ed jerked his head up toward the ceiling, wailing.

"*G-A-A-A-A-A-REEEEEEEEEEEEEE!*"

He stormed through the house, thundered up the stairs, tripped on the top step, tumbled into the hall, and scrambled into Gary's room. His feet crashed through a festival of matchbox cars, lincoln logs, and little people. Between containers of play-doh and pez dispensers, a platoon of army men lined the dresser. He swooped down for a look under the bed, jumped up, and yanked open the closet. Stuffed animals and game boxes avalanched. "*Gary! Where are you!*"

(We took care of him.)

Ed tore back through the house and outside, where Henry Boggs stiffened on the walkway.

"Oh lord!" Henry's eyes were wide. "What happened!"
When Ed ran around the house, Henry followed. "E-E-E-Ed!"

Gary's bicycle lay in the yard, removing the chance that he had ridden off scared, as he often did when Ed lost his head.

"G-a-a-a-a-a-ry!"

Pale, Henry moved his mouth with no words Ed could hear.

What he heard was Broward, who stood a little behind Henry. "I think you murdered your son just as you murdered your wife."

Ed screamed at the top of his voice, *"I DIDN'T KILL MY SON! I DIDN'T KILL MY FAMILY! I DIDN'T!"*

Henry backed away with his hands raised. *You did*, his wide eyes said. *Oh my god, you really did.*

Dishes clanked, drawing Ed's gaze to the window over the sink. Barbara gazed back, curls snaking down over her face.

Henry ran for his house, one arm up and hand on his hat.

When Ed bolted into his, he found Barbara in the kitchen, her hair disheveled, green dress tattered, skin pale.

"How could you," she said.

He took hold of her and a chill ran up his arms. "Are you all right! Where have you been! Where did you go!"

"Would you like to see?"

Her lips parted over jagged teeth.

He revolted from her. *"You're not Barbara."*

A glow rose in her eyes, irises green and rippling, like holes in reality to a place where green flames burned.

He motioned for the living room.

Buffalo Bob in his cowboy garb blocked his way, pointing. *"There's no place for you in Doodyville now, mister!"*

The kitchen filled with people.

"You didn't pay attention!" Gary yelled. "And they ate me up! *You let them eat me up!*"

Broward nodded behind him. "Yes, I think we have enough evidence for a conviction."

"Oh, how could you," Barbara moaned.

Ed cupped his hands over his ears. "None of you are real."

"Oh, don't you worry now, Edward," his mother said. In a frilly apron and gaudy dress too small for her large frame, she cooked on the stove. "If I cooked them up just the way you liked it, you wouldn't eat it anyhoo." Plastic army men sizzled and melted on a frying pan. "This is how you always take them."

"You are hereby convicted of eating your family," said Judge Frewin, who Ed once stood before after a bar-room brawl in 1949. "Have you anything to say before we commence the sentencing?"

Ed's fingers curled, tightened around his hair, yanked. "It's not true. None of this is true."

"Oh how they hunger in that terrible Grim," his twin said.

"How they hunger." Barbara stepped to the side.

From behind her came Ed's father, a gaunt man with a deep-lined face and a bullet hole in his head. While the others snarled and hissed and Howdy Doody giggled in the window over the sink, his father cleared his throat and recited the text off a crumpled page as he might a Shakespeare passage:

"The Indians told Robert Mauwer that the land westward of Saffron Creek was bad. The soil tainted. But the land was no longer theirs..."

Ed's dark twin snatched away the page and *ate* it.

"Guess what time it is," Buffalo Bob said gravely.

"How..." Ed backed as the crowd closed in, grinning with cannibal teeth, eyes filled with hunger. "Howdy Doody Time?"

Buffalo Bob shook his head slowly.

Barbara cackled, a sound not sane or human.

Ed felt frigid air, saw frost wafting out around his head,
and whirled toward a black opening in the world.

Arms rushed out. Clawed hands gripped and pulled him
through the door that slammed shut behind him.

Demons take demon shapes.

Inside out, Ed Hoad went into the Grim now theirs.

There he suffered the fate of The Jasmanglers.

Murdered by metaphors.

O N E

THE HAMMER MAN

1

Nineteen years ago, shortly after he graduated from Barksdale High in the summer of 1988, Chad Hyman killed two people with a pair of imaginary scissors he made with his hand. The enormity of it hadn't truly hit him until months later, when he was a struggling college student stuck with an art class that he was sure to flunk. Chad didn't know how to recognize or appreciate art, but was taken by a painting of *The Fates*, the weavers of destiny from Greek mythology, or so he was told. The lives of people--the normal, mortal people--were flimsy threads spun and snipped at the whim of the sisters. He never forgot that painting, or the name of the one who did *the cutting*.

Whenever he had stared at the scissors in the hands of Atropos, it brought him back to the night he had cut the threads of Roger Beagan and Stacy Kurn from Sumner Bay, a small lakefront city fifteen miles northeast of the Barksdale-Sutton Valley area.

One could argue that what Chad did was an act of self-defense. It was either Roger and Stacy, or Chad and his best friend Ben Norwood. *Death* already had four kids in its wagon and wanted two more. No one knew it at the time. No one ever knows when death is in attendance to make a claim, or which of life's little crossroads up ahead it might be waiting at.

Around three in the morning, they stood on the driveway of a frat-house in Sumner Bay where a party was winding down. Their friend Alan had driven them there and left them

stranded, not that this was out of his character.

The last group with a car had just come out, four kids from Sutton Valley. As unpleasant as the driver Chris Purvis seemed, he offered rides. Chad and Ben didn't know him, and neither did Roger Beagan and his girlfriend Stacy who wanted a ride to the Sumner Bay outskirts. Between them, Purvis had no favorites. Two people already in the back seat, his freckle-faced girlfriend in the passenger seat, he would take two more. Only two. Chad and Roger wrangled over it. Both tall and strong, they stood on even ground if words became more.

Purvis had revved the engine. *"The bus is leaving, assholes!"* he said, his face half hidden behind long hair, cigarette burning. "You've got thirty seconds to sort it out or all four of you can kiss my ass. *Flip a coin or somethin'!*"

"Rock paper scissors," Ben offered.

"Fine," Roger growled. "You game?"

"Let's go." Chad didn't know any more than Roger that their hands just became lethal weapons.

Roger's girlfriend Stacy stood to the side, hugging herself in Roger's varsity football jacket.

While Ben counted, Chad suspected Roger would go with *rock*. It was the macho thing to do. So Chad would do paper. One decision, however small and inconsequential it may seem at the time, could change a person's life. It could end it too.

But Chad changed his mind at the last moment.

He came out with scissors.

Roger Beagan chose rock.

"The lovebirds ride," Purvis said, legitimizing it.

Not long after, everyone in that car was dead. Most on impact. Stacy was the last to go as the EMTs tried to extract her from the mangle of metal the car had become after being struck by a train on the Norfolk and Western tracks. Only

those who died knew for sure what happened, but the tires had left no marks to suggest Purvis braked.

Chad hadn't really known the six who died. He never felt guilty either, even if he felt bad. He never asked himself why he and Ben had lived instead of Roger Beagan and Stacy Kurn. He never stopped to consider that he lived because fate had other things in mind or God had plans for him or any such hooey, because that would have meant that some people were disposable, serving no purpose except to die or suffer to show the lucky people that they were on Earth for a reason. It would have meant that there was some intelligent but brutal design behind things, instead of a random mess of flimsy threads.

People's adult lives start at different times. Chad Hyman's had started that night when he was eighteen, when all that stood between life and death was a drunken game of rock-paper-scissors.

If he had stuck with *paper*, he wouldn't have gone to college or flunked out of it. He never would have met Patricia Garen, much less married her with Ben as his best man. Trish wouldn't have given birth to their daughter Caroline or their son Buck. They wouldn't own a sedan, a jeep, and the modest house at 819 Hulls Hill Road in Sutton Valley near the Barksdale town line.

There would be no *they* at all.

Through the years, whenever Chad stopped to take stock of his life, his mind drove him back to those crossroads in time and the humbling thought came:

I'm here because I chose scissors.

Crazy but true.

It flashed in his head the January morning that he read the obituary of ERIC PENGSY. There was no mention of how Eric died at the age of 20, but Chad knew.

An aspiring cyclist, Eric pedaled many miles a day, often

on the back roads in a gigantic loop, sometimes on the lakefront trails, or the paths that wound through the hills of southern Barksdale, far out in the boonies. Something went wrong when Eric came down off the paths onto Echo Valley Road. In that area, it slanted around a cliff. Eric had smashed into the guardrail. The bike stopped, but he kept going. Sixty feet down. His skull hit the rocks. His helmet protected his head, but not his neck, which busted.

Chad wondered at what point the crucial decision was made. Rock, paper, scissors.

When had Eric chosen the wrong one?

Eric was a cousin of Chad's friend "Pengsy", who no one called by his first name of Padget unless they wanted *trouble*. Ten years back, in the construction days when some called Chad "The Hammer Man" and Pengsy just plain "psycho", a foreman called him Padget during an argument over where to drill holes and Pengsy floored him. It was a bad thing to do, not because the guy didn't deserve it, but because Pengsy got himself fired.

His parents had named him after his great great grandfather, but their noble intentions hardly compensated for the ridicule they had condemned him to. Any time Chad imagined having to grow up and write *Padget Pengsy* over and over again, hear it every school morning, he cringed.

Chad didn't see Pengsy much any more. They used to get together on weekends, usually at Chad's apartment or more recently the back deck of his house while citronella candles burned, and they would chew the fat over Budweisers (or *bid-wizers* as Chad called them unconsciously).

Ever since Pengsy became a *Friend of Bill W*, those weekend pissers had stopped. He never dropped by and Chad understood why. Chad had become a bad association. That might have been a lousy way to think of it, but it was the

bottom line. From time to time, they talked on the telephone. Never for long. Long enough to know that Pengsy had come to think of his cousin Eric as the little brother he never had. Chad also knew that Pengsy had been dry for two years, give or take. Considering he had just been laid off on the heels of a divorce, Eric's death had surely pushed him to the limits of relapse city.

If not beyond.

Chad had been quick to call Pengsy to offer condolences and lend support. It was the first time they had talked--really talked--in a long while, and Chad realized just how much he missed their old weekly get-togethers of drinking Buds and pitching the cans over his back railing.

But those days were gone forever.

Nowadays Chad drank alone or went to Frick's Pub in downtown Barksdale with Danny Rothman. They weren't as close as Chad had been with Pengsy, but they were friends as well as coworkers.

Working full-time and on call 24/7, Chad had been with the crew the longest. He answered only to Henry Boggs and the head manager of his interests, Stuart Sheldon, whose responsibilities continued to grow as Henry's mind faded. The old man owned thirty-five rental properties, mostly houses but also five commercial buildings and an apartment complex. That translated into plenty of work for the small crew of men who handled repairs, maintenance, and whatever else needed to be done.

For the past months, ever since Danny Rothman was caught driving stoned and with bag of grass in his glove box, the first thing Chad did after he left his house was swing through the Barksdale Square to pick Danny up.

Sometimes Danny was late. Never by much.

Until January 5th.

2

Snow came down in big fluffy flakes, sailed through the air dreamily as if a gigantic down pillow had been torn open in the heavens. Covering the cracked sidewalks and battered benches, garnishing the decrepit fountains and sorry excuse for a gazebo, it rendered the Barksdale Square fit for a post-card photograph.

It also made for a slushy mess of the roads.

When Chad didn't see Danny at his usual spot near the post office, he supposed the weather caused a hitch.

Chad circled The Square many times before he dug out his cell phone. He advanced through the numbers in memory until he reached those of the crew, who all had cells at Stuart's demand, compliments of Sutton Valley's own screwy *Valley Mobile* cellular service, a retarded child of the local phone company.

He selected Danny's number.

SEARCHING FOR SIGNAL..., the display told him.

"That's it, Stu. You can shove your supporting-your-local-business shit right back up your horn where it came from."

Finally, the number dialed, and rang.

A robot voice said, *"The cell phone of this subscriber cannot be reached at this time,"* and he supposed Danny had either shut it off again or Valley Mobile was farting obliviously in its lazy chair. *"Leave a message after the tone or press 1 to send a numeric page."*

He hit 1. Pages were the most reliable. Messages tended to lag when calls wouldn't go through for some reason. One eye on the road, he punched in '9876543210', which meant in English: Call Chad or he's coming to hurt you.

He opted not to drive to Danny's place for fear of missing

him, decided to give Danny fifteen more minutes, and parked his jeep--a big black hard-top monster like no other in town.

If Danny showed, he would spot it.

Meanwhile, Chad went into *Jerry's News* where he bought a bottle of iced coffee and a pack of Camels, saving himself a later trip.

When he came out, he heard the hydraulic hiss and groan of a bus. His eyes followed it as it pulled away from the stop.

Chad remembered all the times Danny talked about fighting the urge to hop on that bus, ride it to wherever, and not look back. The call of his drifter nature, Chad had supposed. Though Danny had found a woman who was easy on the eyes and loved him, Chad watched the bus trundle down Main and had to wonder.

"Chad!" Danny stood on the curb across the street.

Late twenties, well-built, his face scruffy, long hair in a bushy pony-tail, he scooted through a gap in traffic.

Chad shook his head. "I was gonna give up on ya."

"I saw your page," Danny said. "I tried to call. Wouldn't go through. I'm so sorry. I kept hitting the snooze and Nina--"

"I don't care. You're here. Let's go." Chad climbed into the jeep. "We're behind."

Danny got in and plucked a mini-cigar from the breast pocket of his flannel jacket. "No coffee?"

"No time. Miss Arnell on Saybrook has water problems we gotta check out and then we gotta haul ass cross town and help Art install a fuel oil tank." He eyed Danny, averted his eyes, and fired up the engine. "You look stoned."

"Aw, man, gimme a break. I do one stupid thing..." Danny stopped when Chad chuckled. "I'm serious. Ever since then, every time I'm not bright and bushy-tailed, somebody says--"

"I didn't say *you were*." Chad joined traffic. "Just look

like hell."

"I didn't sleep good. Sometimes I lay down and I get to thinking instead of sleeping."

"Still got the poppin'-the-question jitters, huh."

"Tonight's the night," Danny said, and if there was enthusiasm in that, Chad didn't hear it.

"Gonna go through with it then. Good for you."

"But how good for her? A lady like her should have all the good things." Danny lit his cigar and Chad lit a cigarette, one smoker triggering the other. "What sorta life could Nina have with me? Not the kind she deserves, I'll tell you that."

"Let her decide."

"What kind of wedding could I give her? A justice of the peace on somebody's lawn? Reception at some damn fire hall?"

"Cross that bridge when you get there."

"I guess I'll save for it. Just like I saved up for this day. I've got more Ben Franklins in my wallet right now than I've ever had. I withdrew it yesterday and now I've only got double-digits left in the bank. What does that tell you?"

"You'd best be careful with your wallet today."

Danny sighed. "I think she'll say yes anyway, but I don't know if it's the right thing to do."

"If it's about all that, maybe you're right."

"What else would it be about?"

Chad shrugged. *Love and happiness* would be a sappy thing to say and Chad Hyman did not say sappy things.

"I have a ring waiting at P and K's Jewelers and I made reservations for the Firestone Inn."

Chad whistled. "If you're gonna eat like a Rockefeller, you're gonna pay like one too."

"She's worth it."

"Nina doesn't peg me as the sort to be impressed with the fancy-shmancy." Chad took a long drag. "Women like that

care about what comes from inside their man, not their man's wallet."

"And I suppose you proposed to your wife over McDonald's cheeseburgers, right?"

"No."

"See."

Chad turned onto Pond Road, a back way into Sutton Valley. "It was over Chinese take-out in my ratty little apartment. Candles. Soft music on the radio. I made like I pulled the ring out of my noodles and played the *What do suppose this is?* game." The memory warmed him, but his voice was deadpan. "Trish knew all right, but she played dumb and made me say the words."

"She liked that then?"

Chad nodded.

"Nice. You never told me that."

"You never asked and it ain't your business." Chad winked and blew smoke out his nose.

"So, where did you have your reception?"

Chad pursed his lips, pausing. "A fire hall."

3

Saybrook Road steepened as it descended into the valley that nestled downtown. When Chad turned toward the cul-de-sac, the jeep slid on a patch of ice. The back end swung and Chad feared it would take the rest of the jeep with it down Saybrook, sluing and reeling to disaster. Tires sprayed slush, found traction, and the jeep evened on the drive, which was littered with beef chunks and mushy broccoli and sweet potatoes.

"What is all that?" Danny asked.

"Lost marbles."

With no regard to the sweeping view through the trees to

his right, Chad drove past the first house where a kooky lady named Betty Morgan lived, and he pulled up in front of the cape house where his boss Henry Boggs had lived long ago before renting it out to the Arnells.

When his gaze swept across the clearing to the right of the house, he felt a cold flutter deep in his gut. A confused feeling similar to *deja vu* stole over him, as if it called up a blank memory, a package that arrived in his mind but contained nothing. That clearing unnerved him because of it, and not--he told himself, NOT--because of the house that once stood there at the end of the drive, a house that had given rise to spooky childhood stories over the years.

The first man to have lived in it disappeared with his family and was said to have murdered them. The second moved his out after a year with no explanation or forwarding address. The third went crazy and burned it down. Those were the facts, the highlights, which Chad had retained. He let the rest fall by the wayside, because it was poppycock designed to lend weight to what were only coincidences tied to one place. Coincidences washed fine with him, simply had to for a man who owed his life to the outcome of a hand game, but he put no stock in curses or spooks.

Snowflakes sailed in when Danny opened the door and pitched the cigar.

"Don't litter." Chad grabbed his flashlight off the floor and a work-light from the jumble behind the seats. "Use the ashtray. Pick it up."

"Litter?" Danny snorted. "You pitched two smokes out the window on the way here."

"It wasn't Abby's yard. You know how old ladies get."

"Technically now, it ain't her yard."

"Pick it up." Chad stepped out, holstered his flashlight in his tool-belt. "If not, I'll hear about it."

Danny retrieved it. "So Abby is one of *those*, huh?"

"She's fussy about some things." Chad glanced across the yard. "Livin' next to Betty drives her monkey-shit. The way she leaves all that food out."

"Betty rents from Boggs too, no?"

"No. She owns the property. Boggs owns everything else around it though." Chad pointed around. "The land across Saybrook. Most of these woods, behind and below. Owns the land to other side where the Hoad house was." He expected Danny to remark on that, but then remembered Danny wasn't native to the area. "He tried to buy her out once, offered her a lot more than what the property's worth, but she wouldn't bite."

"Can't say I blame her." Danny looked around, sniffing as if he had a cold. "It's quiet. Nice view. I wouldn't mind living up here. I've always loved the woods."

"I bet that hiker that disappeared a few years back was thinking the same." Chad rang the doorbell.

"Disappeared up here? These woods can't be *that* big."

"Big enough, I guess."

They waited on the stoop, snowflakes collected on their heads and shoulders, and Chad pressed the doorbell again.

"Maybe she ain't home," Danny said.

"Always home. Maybe not up." Chad fished in his coat for his cell. "I forgot to buzz her."

A chain-lock clattered, bolt clicked, and door pulled in to Abby's face. Gray popcorn hair, eyes squinting through glasses, lips pressed together and moving as if sucking on an invisible straw, she looked incoherent.

"Morning," Chad said. "Problems with your hot water?" Abby blinked. "What hot water?"

"Do you have warm running water, ma'am? I got a ca--"

"That was sarcasm." Abby eyed him over the rim of her glasses and gave a toothless smile. "Come in, boys."

They exchanged smirks and entered the house, which was well-appointed and spotless. Beneath the smell of cleansers and air freshener lingered a fusty odor that Chad associated with places where elderly people lived. What it was, he didn't know or care.

Clad in a robe, Abby shuffled into the living room where *The Today Show* was on and framed photos abounded on shelves and end-tables. "It started acting up in December. Or was it November?"

Danny sneezed.

"Bless you." Abby eyed him. "You'd better not be bringing any bugs in here, young man. Unless you care to foot a doctor bill."

"It's just my sinuses," he said, sounding uncertain.

"Betty next door caught a bug that's had her in bed for a week. I want nothing to do with that."

"About the water." Chad got them back on track.

"Sometimes it only ran warm. On and off." She settled in a chair and turned on a lamp with finger taps on the metal base. "Now there's only cold."

Chad nodded. "We'll have a look at--"

"Have you boys seen Calliope?"

"I'm sorry. Who?"

"My cat. She hasn't been home in such a long time."

Chad remembered seeing a cat prowling around the last time he was at the property. "The creamy colored cat with spots?" he asked, and she nodded. "Not recently, but I'll keep an eye out."

"I could make coffee if either of you would like some."

"That's very kind, but--"

"I'd love some," Danny said.

Chad elbowed him. "No need, Miss Arnell. I doubt we'll be here for long. We should have the problem fixed up in a

jiffy. Ain't that right, Danny?"

Danny forced a smile. "In a jiffy."

"We'll have to access the downstairs." Chad remembered how Abby snipped at him the last time he was up to fix the toilet and didn't announce that he had to go downstairs to check pipes before he went. He gestured. "The basement..."

"Is in the same place as before," Abby said, making Chad smirk. "If you give me a pencil, I'll draw you a map. Do you need one?"

"No, ma'am."

Chad led Danny through the dining room, past the opening that looked into the kitchen, past the laundry room door, and down the stairs where the shadows were thick. He hit the switch at the bottom step, nothing happened, and he shined his light at a burned-out bulb. "Remind me to change that before we go."

"Why should you?" Danny asked.

"Cuz I'm nice. Speaking of which, I can't believe you were gonna make her stand up and make coffee after she sat down."

"She offered."

"Cuz she's polite," Chad said, as they traveled through the basement which was as clean as the upstairs, everything labeled and neatly stowed in plastic containers. "And the polite thing to do is to decline. Manners, Danny."

They reached the water heater, in the same corner as the holding tank and circuit breaker, and Chad hooked the work-light onto a pipe.

"Plug me in." Chad scanned the tank with his flashlight, lowered the beam to the wet floor, and when Danny didn't move, he shined it in his face. "Today."

"Sorry." He plugged the light into the outlet next to the fusebox. "I was thinking about Nina again."

"You think too much, brother." Chad inspected the unit which looked to be on its last leg and removed the burner

covers. "Pilot light out."

He tried to relight it, but it wouldn't stay.

"A clogged line maybe," Danny said. "Sometimes dirt--"

"Pilot line's fine. The thermocouple is my vote." Chad checked to make sure it was tight and it was. "If it is, it doesn't matter. We've got leakage anyhow."

Danny pitched the work-light down to the puddle on the floor. "That might be from the relief valve."

"Some of it proolly. But it's seeping from the base. Out around the threads, too. Corrosion's been eating up the fittings. Give it a few weeks, a month tops, and this whore's gonna be sprayin'." Chad rose. "It's gonna have to be replaced. The whole dang thing. And soon."

"Like we don't got enough on our plate."

"I might be able to patch it. It won't last, but maybe long enough. Till we get back to swap it out." Chad pulled out his cell phone. "Go grab the green toolbox from the back of the jeep. The teflon pipe wrap, too. Dig around. You'll find it."

"Okay. Do you want me to talk--"

"I'll tell her. Just get the toolbox like I said."

Danny started away and stopped, turning. "Hey."

Chad looked up from the words 'SEARCHING FOR SIGNAL' on his cell display, his face cast in blue light. "Yuh?"

A silence passed.

"Maybe I won't take her to Firestone."

Chad shrugged and smirked. "Maybe you won't."

Without another word, Danny walked into the shadows. Disappeared into the black.

Chad called Art Kroppel about replacing the unit, maybe adding an expansion tank, and talked for an unknown time before wondering why Danny wasn't back yet. Maybe he was having trouble finding the pipe wrap or decided to sneak in a cigar, but it seemed like a very long time since he left.

Too long.

When Chad went upstairs, he saw Abby in the recliner chair as before, but her expression made him stop.

Her TV remote raised, mouth ajar, and eyes wide behind her glasses, she looked stunned, as if something gave her a scare or terrible vision.

Oh Christ, is she having some kind of attack?

Knowing her heart wasn't so good from the summer they re-shingled the roof and she suffered an attack, he worried.

"Everything okay, Miss Arnell?" He glanced at the TV, which was off. "Miss?"

Her eyes slid toward him.

"You all right?"

"Yes." Her voice was thin, hand trembling as she set down the remote, and her eyes returned to the TV. "The things they get away with these days."

"It must have been something." Chad drew a few deep breaths. Before now, they had been shallow. "I came up looking for my partner."

She pointed toward the door. "He hasn't been back."

Chad nodded. "Sure you're okay? I could call somebody."

Abby rose unsteadily. "I should eat some fruit."

"Okay." He furrowed his brows. "Will that help?"

"Breakfast," she said dourly, and passed him. "I haven't had breakfast."

He let it go and went outside.

Snow from the sky was tapering, but the wind had picked up, shedding what had built up on the trees as they swayed and knocked branches.

Chad saw his back hatch was open and walked around his jeep. "Hey, Danny, you gonna..."

Danny wasn't there. The green toolbox had been pulled forward. The rest of the tools and parts looked undisturbed.

"Where the hell did he go?"

There was nowhere *to* go up there on the hill, except the Morgan house. Anywhere else was a distance down Saybrook or a grueling hike up it.

Head lowered, he scanned the footprints in the snow. Those from when they arrived were degraded, reduced to slight impressions, but the fresher set were easy to spot. From behind the jeep, they trailed off the cul-de-sac, close together with drag-marks. His eyes followed them across the clearing.

Why he would go in the forest, Chad could only guess.

Chad hollered his name many times before he rang his cell, using the jeep as a shield against the wind. It barely completed a ring before he got an automated message, this time with a male voice he hadn't heard before.

"The cellular customer you are trying to reach is out of calling range," the static-laden voice said, and in the pause that followed, Chad expected an OR that never came. There was no "or has their phone turned off", or "is on another line", or "is unavailable", or the ever favorite and all-purpose "cannot be reached at this time".

No. The screwy Valley Mobile network said flatly he was *out of range*, which Chad would find miraculous, short of Danny finding a bomb shelter or falling into a very deep hole in the last twenty-some minutes. A service tower stood three miles away. He couldn't get out of range by car in that time, much less on foot.

Chad supposed it was just another testament to how wonky the service was.

A voice cut in unexpectedly: *"Leave a message after the tone or press 1 to send a numeric page."*

He tried again with the same result, and left a page.

Hours later, Chad got the same.

By early evening, when he and Art were replacing the water heater at Abby's, Chad was furious. He called again and

this time left a message.

"If I don't hear from you by tomorrow morning or you don't have a damned good explanation for bailing out on me, you're out of a job. Friend or no friend, I mean it."

When night fell, he was scrambling to finish his tasks for the day. Minus Danny, Chad had gotten backed up and the FNG was at his other job, unable to be called in.

Thoughts of throttling Danny came often.

The anger didn't wane until he got a message from Nina, who must have rang him while he was on another call. She knew nothing about Danny being MIA. Chad told her what he knew and abstained from mentioning the occasion Danny had planned.

With a question mark behind his eyes, Chad went to sleep that night in the dog-house, his wife's lingo for *on the couch*.

He didn't sleep for long.

His cell phone roused him from a strange dream at three o'clock in the morning.

Grumbling, he snatched the phone off the coffee table and looked at the number of the caller. It was Danny's.

He answered: "Make it good. Make it very good."

When he heard only noise on the line, Chad supposed Danny had bumped his phone and was unaware that it dialed him. That had happened before, a few times for Chad too.

"Danny? *D-a-a-a-a-a-nneeee*." He raised his voice, but not too much so as not to wake Trish or the kids. "You bumped your phone again, you bastard stiff. I know you're there."

Chad heard a dull rattling sound, a bumping of many things, as if a heap of wood scraps and maybe bamboo had been disturbed. Voices carried over the line too, barely. They were whispering, almost hissing. If any words were said, he couldn't make them out.

"Danny?"

His ears picked out the *other* noises and his stomach

rolled over. They were wet and sloppy sounds. He supposed he wouldn't be as disturbed if he knew what was causing them. All he could think of was someone stirring runny goulash while others ate with their faces shoved in it.

The last noise he heard, before the call cut off and left him wide awake, was a loud metallic groan and thud.

As if a heavy door closed on old hinges.

T W O

VACANCIES

1

Two days after Chad sent him to grab a toolbox and some pipe wrap, Danny Rothman was reported missing by Nina. She had been just as frantic the day before and on the phone often with Chad.

On day four, as Chad sat in Sutton Valley's humble police station with his friend Officer Paul Kemp, he reflected on the graveness in Danny's voice when he said:

Maybe I won't take her to Firestone.

Chad took that to mean that Danny would follow his advice and not break his wallet for frills that wouldn't matter to Nina anyway. Now he wondered if Danny meant he wasn't going to take her to Firestone because he wasn't going to stay in the area, much less pop the big question.

Chad scanned the cramped conference room that doubled as an interrogation room and fidgeted with his cigarettes. "I know I told you that he talked about jumping town now and then, but--"

"He expressed that to more than a few people," Paul said. "From what I understand this wouldn't be the first time he picked up and left. It's suspicious though that he only took the shirt on his back. Generally, people just don't do that."

"If he wanted to leave, he had his chance that morning when the bus left."

"Why not the car?"

"Other than the suspended license? It's Nina's car."

Paul nodded. "You said he was late that morning. Is it possible it's because he was waiting for that bus, or in the least considering taking it, but then changed his mind?"

"If he lied when he said he overslept. Anything's possible, I reckon. Why'd you ask that?"

Paul scratched at his mustache. "If the thought was already in his head, afterwards he might have had regret that he faltered and from that found the resolve."

"To what?" An edge entered Chad's voice. "Walk off in the woods? Walk away from everything? Just like that? He was planning to propose for crissake."

"I'm only hanging a tag on each possible avenue. Don't take offense." Paul glanced at the clock for the sixth or seventh time. "Last contact was that call at three AM?"

"If you can call it contact. There was no talking involved. It came from his phone, but I didn't hear Danny's voice. I heard..." Chad thought of the sounds. "I don't know what I heard. I think somebody bumped it. It's happened before."

"You claimed he had a lot of cash on him."

"I didn't see it, but he mentioned it and what it was for. He never did pick up the ring."

"Having that kind of cash could get you a long way from here. It could also attract the sort of attention that could get you in trouble, even in the valley if you run across the wrong joe. Who else knew about it?"

Chad shrugged. "Maybe no one. I know Nina didn't."

"Think back. Could anyone have tailed you to your first service call on Saybrook?"

"I didn't get that sense, no."

"Someone could have seen Rothman come out alone and took the opportunity to jump him while he was at the back of your jeep."

Chad shook his head. "No footprints."

"Pardon?"

"In the snow. Only tracks were mine and his. The fresh set of his went in the woods. He wasn't running when he left 'em. They were close together. Drag marks too." Chad remembered how Danny seemed to have a cold and said it was his sinuses. He imagined Danny shambling away from the jeep in a daze, ill and disoriented, and collapsing somewhere where his body would be found after the snow melted. "Damn me for not following those tracks while they were still there."

Paul seemed surprised by his observations and added to his notes. "So he entered the woods alone. Of his own volition. I don't know what else that would suggest."

"It don't suggest *why* he would. Is it cuz he decided to hike into town and grab a cab out of town? Or is it cuz he was out of it or distracted by somethin'?"

"We're talking to the cab companies. As well as other friends in town who he might have gone to get a lift. We can't outrule him hitch-hiking either."

"*If* he left."

"If. We can't rule out foul play either." Paul sounded doubtful. "Off the record, Chad, it sounds to me like he might have walked. Unless evidence turns up that calls that into question."

"It sounds fishy to me."

"I wouldn't be surprised if he turns up in a week or two, a month, maybe even days. In cases like this, they almost always do. He coulda got cold feet."

Chad hoped Paul wasn't going to sit on his hands.

"What's being done?"

"Sheriff's office is putting out a bulletin." Paul leaned back. "The woods will get a walk-through, but they'll be on the lookout for him county-wide. If he turns up in his hometown in Ohio, we'll know too. Police there have been alerted."

It was more than Chad expected, and he was glad.

"We have to presume the worst until there's evidence to substantiate otherwise," Paul said. "In the meantime, let us know if you hear from Danny again."

2

Two weeks passed and no one had.

Life went on. So did work. The Boggs crew had been undermanned before Danny vanished and Chad had to work twice as hard without a partner. Stuart Sheldon had left it up to him to find a replacement, but Chad chewed on it for too long and his workload backed up. He had pinned hopes on Danny resurfacing, not because it would make things easier, but because it didn't feel right offering out his job. Firing him was what it amounted to. It seemed like a piss poor thing to do without knowing what happened. Danny could have been dead for all he knew and the thought had reared its ugly head more than once. That had been his sticking point, not who to call. He had someone in mind.

His old friend Pengsy.

Having done construction work, freelance plumbing, and being an experienced electrician, Pengsy had know-how to bring on the job, unlike some of the dunderheads Stuart hired in the past. Pengsy didn't have the best track record. A gifted collector of pink slips, he had a long history of personality conflicts. But Pengsy would only be working with *him* and Chad knew how to handle him. He doubted there would be any problems, so long as he warned the others ahead of time not to call him Padget (and then emphasized that he was *not* kidding about the trouble it would invite, so no one got any joker ideas.)

There was a chance Pengsy would decline, of course, if not because he was working somewhere else then maybe for the

same reason he never dropped by the house any more, but the last Chad knew, Pengsy was down on his luck.

He suspected that hadn't changed when he called and got a message that the line was disconnected.

After work, Chad drove to Pengsy's place.

As he parked on the potholed street, he saw Pengsy's rusted white sedan in the driveway and a yellow paper on the screen door of his apartment.

Chad slogged through the unshoveled walkway and went up the porch steps, noting the jumble of boxes that were powdered with snow and had been hidden by the overgrown hedges. He peered at the yellow paper. Tucked between the screen and the metal trim, it was a disconnection notice from the cable company.

The buzzer noise the doorbell made sounded sick.

He knocked instead.

White noise brayed. Footfalls followed.

The inner door jerked in and Pengsy stuck his face in the opening. His scalp sparse with hair, face grown out with stubble, lips in a snarl, pores standing out under his eyes that seemed no less wild when they met Chad's, Pengsy didn't seem in the mood for company.

"Hey, bud," Chad said uncertainly. He recognized that look on Pengsy's face as the one he got when he drank and went into paranoid mode. The smells escaping the door that Chad picked up on were of dirty laundry, stale smoke, coffee, and bacon, but not of alcohol. "I tried to call. Is this a bad time?"

Pengsy's eyes shifted from side to side. "No. It's good."

"Okay." Chad wondered, even more when Pengsy swung the door fully open and he saw the wooden bat in his hand. "I'm glad I wasn't the wrong person."

"You should be," Pengsy said, probably in humor despite his flat tone. "Come in and close the door behind ya."

Chad did and followed him into the living room where knives and daggers adorned the walls and a TV displayed a snowy image, the six o'clock news behind a static blizzard. "Here I was gonna leave the door open so you could heat up the outside. I'm sick of winter."

"I'm sick of about every damn thing in the world." Clad in sweat-shorts and a raggedy tank-style tee-shirt that sagged under red chest hairs, Pengsy tossed the bat on the couch, where he had been sleeping from the look of it. "What brings you by?"

Chad scanned the messy room that was dotted with ashtrays, flung laundry, and wrappers. His gaze settled on the dead beta floating at the surface in Pengsy's fish-tank. "I thought I'd see how you were doin' for one."

Pengsy made a sweeping gesture. "You came and you saw."

"I meant how you were holdin' up."

"Holding up." Pengsy sniggered. "You mean you came to see if I found the bottle again."

"No," Chad said, but it had crossed his mind. "That's not what I meant. I meant with Eric--"

"*I don't...*," Pengsy said, tensing, "wanna think about it."

"Okay." Chad knew bottling things up was half of Pengsy's problem, no *Friends of Bill W* pun intended, but let it go.

"How's the ball and chain and the runts?" Pengsy asked, and Chad took no offense to the runt reference. For Pengsy, it was a term of endearment.

"Trish and the kids are fine. Buck's in school now."

"I bet he's a little hellion just like his daddy." Pengsy's voice remained flat. "Always wanted a son. Me n' Jill used to talk about kids. Tried for one once too." He scowled, pausing. "It's for the best we didn't. The way things turned out."

"You and Jill were too alike."

"Funny. She used to say the opposite. So, you said you came by for a few things. What else?"

"Did you hear about Danny Rothman?"

Pengsy repeated the name a few times while he fidgeted with an antenna rigged to his TV. "That friend of yours?"

"Yuh. He's gone missing."

"No kiddin'," Pengsy said, disinterested. "What happened?"

"No one knows." Chad drifted to a set of daggers on the wall, dusty but razor sharp. "There are theories. I'm not sure what to believe. But it's left me short a man. That's the other reason I came to see you."

"Oh yeah? Why?"

"Why do you think?"

"Lemme guess," Pengsy said, not looking at him but the TV. "Cuz you thought of poor me and wanted to reach out. Ain't that right?"

"No. I thought of a friend who had the skills and I'd like to work with."

"That's awful nice that you thought of me, but don't you worry. I don't want to be your charity, man."

"You aren't my damn charity. I'm yours. I'm a man down and need your help. I need somebody who knows how to do the work and I don't have to babysit."

Pengsy chuckled. "What makes you think I'm gonna give to *your* damn charity?"

"You got a job?"

"No."

"You do now. And don't you be a pain in the ass about it or there's gonna be *a fight*."

Pengsy looked at him then, his brows rising. "Yeah?"

Chad nodded, pokerfaced. "That's what I said."

"Think you can take me?" He walked up to Chad and

they stared eye-to-eye. "Better take off your coat."

"Won't need to." Chad took in the smell of his breath to see if there was any booze on it, sensed none, and felt guilty for doing it.

Pengsy cocked his head. "There might be blood."

"Wouldn't be a party if there wasn't."

A silence passed, then a chuckle rose out of Pengsy.

"Reminds me of the old days." Pengsy passed him into the kitchen, which was everything one might expect from a born-again bachelor. "Working for old man Boggs still?"

"That's right. Plenty of work. Good pay." Chad eyed the counter where a pot of tar brewed. A mug of straws and spilled coffee grounds around his grinder conjured the humorous mental image of Pengsy snorting coffee. "You'll ride with me eighty-ninety percent of the time."

"So you'll be my hemorrhoid?"

"No, you'll be mine." Chad glanced at the broken clock, then his watch. "I've gotta high-tail it home. Trish has been in a mood." He started out of the kitchen. "I'll pick you up tomorrow morning."

"Hey now. I didn't agree to anything."

"Tomorrow morning." Chad looked back. "I'm comin' to pick you up or I'm comin' to hurt you. I'll be ready for either."

Pengsy grinned and winked. "Me too."

3

Two weeks with Pengsy on the job chugged along at a smooth pace. This cast out the doubts that had lingered in Chad's mind about whether Pengsy would get along with the rest of the crew. He supposed he remembered the belligerent hot-headed Pengsy from the construction days too well, but Pengsy seemed to have changed since then. Mellowed out.

Maybe he had just learned restraint.

Only once, when Art Kroppel got into a debate with Pengsy over how to repair a furnace and the old fire entered Pengsy's eyes, did Chad worry a hammer was about fall.

Either that or Art would, at the snap of Pengsy's fist.

Instead Pengsy stopped, drew a monster breath, heard Art out, and admitted he was wrong, something people once thought him incapable of. Of course, trying to predict Pengsy was a science as fuzzy as predicting earthquakes. A tremor now and then may mean nothing, but the fault lines are there so one never knows what pressure might be mounting beneath the surface.

As for the work itself, Pengsy was a dream partner who had enthusiasm and hands eager to dirty themselves with the next task. The novelty of this had yet to wear off. One Friday afternoon, as Pengsy operated the backhoe to get at a septic tank and insisted Chad sit that one out, Chad reflected on how refreshing it was to have a number two who was just as competent. As had happened over the past weeks, these thoughts were chased by feelings about Danny, who was still missing.

Twenty-two days and counting.

He had kept contact with Nina by phone, lending a shoulder and opening himself up to dirty looks from his wife Trish, who was notoriously paranoid and probably had suspicions based on the sad reality that they hadn't done the wild thing in a coon's age.

The call from Nina that tore him away from his almost religious ritual of chopping wood to work out the demons, that sent him zooming cross-town to see her, came Sunday afternoon. She was crying so hard he barely understood a word and the most terrible possibility came to mind: she was informed that Danny had turned up dead.

That wasn't the case, but whether the news was good was

open to debate.

"I'm pregnant." Her voice cracked, body trembled as she crumpled over on the couch beside him, dark hair spilled over her face that she buried in her hands, and when she leaned, sobbing against his chest, he put an arm around her.

Stunned and not sure what to say, he held her for a time before he found words and managed to calm her down.

"Bringing a new life into the world isn't such a bad thing," he told her, among other things, but knew it was more complicated than that. Like Danny, she didn't have much of anyone to offer support. No decent family to speak of. He knew she was scared. Scared about the future and what might have happened to Danny.

It better have been something bad, he thought. That fate sister Atropos better have snipped your thread, cuz if you made the choice to walk away without leaving any means to contact you after you left a seed in Nina, you're lower than scum.

"We don't know for sure where Danny is," he said.
"There's no saying he won't resurface and have an explanation."

"Do you think so?"

Chad didn't. "Sure I do. Life is a crazy thing that way. But even if that doesn't happen, the most important thing now is that baby." He judged by her awkward expression that he wasn't much good at this. "I say concentrate on that. And being a mother. No matter what, I think all things happen for a reason."

She nodded, her eyes cast down.

"In the meanwhile, you have my number. Anything you need. Anything. You just call. I'll be there for you. Until then. Even after. I'll be there, okay?"

She hugged him. "I don't know what I would have done

without you here through all this."

"It doesn't matter. Because I am here. Whenever you call."

She chuckled through tears. "You'll just fly on over like the man of steel, huh."

"Like a man of steel," he agreed.

When he returned home, he found Trish had gone through the trouble of making a big chicken dinner, one that she and Caroline and little Buck would have to enjoy without him. He had no appetite. He went out in the backyard and chopped wood instead, even knowing it might cause a fight.

It didn't, but he could tell Trish was peeved.

They barely spoke that night and when they went to bed, Trish slept on the edge of the bed. Buck was still awake between them. This was nothing new. Getting the kid to sleep in his room was a battle Chad seldom had the energy for. As usual, Chad had to tell him to lay down many times before he fell asleep. Even then, he was restless.

Chad lay flat on his back, his eyes turned upward toward the ceiling but looking more in than out. Every now and then, he looked at the clock. It was 2:40 the last time he checked, before his eyes closed and his mind sank into the haze of sleep.

Down in the darkness where nightmares ran amok like demented children.

Where Chris Purvis often was, revving the engine of his old Ford in the dead of night, ready to load up passengers and catch the last train to Deadsville.

Where the wet, sucking sounds were, too.

4

"You look like shit," Pengsy told him the next morning as they pulled away from the fifth site on the list. "Did you have a late night with the missus?"

On that note, Pengsy winked and Chad scowled.

"I ain't had one of those in a long time." Chad blew smoke out his nose. "Where to next? Or are you slacking?"

"Maybe." Pengsy pulled the clipboard down from the visor and flipped through the wrinkly pages. "Five Melburg Road. No hot water."

"Boonies. Skip it for now. What's next? Something close."

"Stuart marked this one PR. What's that?"

"Priority. Next time you see that, give it to me first thing. What is it?"

"Tenant complaint about a junk freezer at thirty-two Saybrook, Miss Arnell, remove..." Pengsy stopped reading. "What's the matter?"

"It's odd is all." Chad blinked and narrowed his eyes. "It must be a goof. I don't know how, but it's gotta be."

His mind conjured up the image of the rusty icebox that had been rotting for forty-fifty years on the old 34 Saybrook plot. He remembered how it made him uneasy, perhaps because he once removed another just like it, and he remembered how surprised he was that it stayed together when they loaded it on a truck and took it to the junkyard.

"Me and Danny removed that thing about six months back." Chad dug out his phone and selected the number of Stuart Sheldon, who picked up on the first ring.

"Lo."

"Hey, Stu. You put something on the list done a long time ago. The old freezer on Saybrook."

"The what?"

Chad pulled over, snatched the clipboard out of Pengsy's hand, and read Stu the entry. "Why's it back on the list and why did you mark it priority?"

"I came across it in my notes from last week." Stu's voice

gained distance. "Miss Arnell called last Monday about it."

"Why didn't it make the list *then*? You could have sent Art. He's been there at least three times since to plow."

"Somehow I forgot about it," Stu said, and it wasn't like him. "It slipped my mind again apparently, because I didn't know what you were on about at first."

Chad was only marginally aware that it had slipped his mind too, as he had been unable to remember until now what it was about that clearing that made him uneasy. It was that freezer. "It was removed. Ask Art. He helped load it."

"She insisted it was still there," Stu said.

"In her mind maybe, but not on the property."

"Was there anything else out there? Maybe you missed--"

"There wasn't nothin' else there. I'm headed there now. Bye." He pitched the clipboard on Pengsy's lap and swung back onto the road. "For crissake."

"Why go there if it's removed?"

"So I can ask Abby. Stu could have it wrong and she called cuz her icebox is acting up or something along those lines."

When he turned onto the cul-de-sac and drove over Betty Morgan's latest offerings to the deer and skunks, Pengsy asked about the food scraps and Chad gave his stock answer:

"Lost marbles."

He parked in front of Abby's. Thinking of the day Danny vanished, he frowned and they got out. The snow was powdery and blowing around, the wind razor cold and whistling through something up toward the house, probably around the gutters which were slated to be replaced that spring.

"Where is it?" Pengsy asked.

Chad gestured to the clearing, where he scanned and saw only the snow and skeletal trees. "It *was* right there." He turned away. "Like I said, me and Danny--"

"You mean that?"

"It..." Chad looked back over his shoulder at Pengsy, who pointed off to the rusty freezer that Chad had seen before, but *had not* seen a moment ago. "How the..."

"It doesn't look like you took it away."

"We took something away, I'll tell you that." Chad wouldn't admit that the freezer there now looked just like the one he removed, down to the rust patterns. It couldn't be. That was that. "And there was nothin' there when we left. There hasn't been anything there since. This is recent. Somebody must have left it off here instead of disposing of it properly."

"Why here?"

"How the hell should I know."

"At least we know it wasn't only in the lady's h...", Pengsy started, and his voice fell away.

Chad eyed him. "What? You look like a goose--"

"It's nothing." Pengsy gave his head a few hard shakes. "Thought I saw something that wasn't there."

"Like what?"

Pengsy craned his head to the side, tilting it, and sniffed. "Do you smell something?"

He checked and found he didn't.

"Can't be the food on the driveway." Pengsy drifted behind Chad. "It's frozen."

"Don't smell a thing." Chad stared at the freezer, now wondering if someone brought it back from the junkyard as some kind of joke.

Pengsy had walked off and Chad didn't know it until he heard him holler at some distance.

He went around the jeep and up the walkway toward the steps, where he saw brown paper bags.

Pengsy pointed to a window. "You'd think she would have called about that."

Cracks spider-webbed around a jagged hole in the glass that the wind shrilled through.

"Looks to be from the inside out," Pengsy said.

Chad crouched over the bags that snow had gotten into and looked inside them. A carton of milk, tea boxes, frozen lunch meat in baggies, loaf of bread, and other provisions, it could only be the groceries Abby had delivered during the week. "This has been here for a bit."

"That smell again."

This time, Chad caught a whiff and his stomach lurched. He could only think of rancid parmesan cheese. "Garbage?"

"I think I know." Pengsy went to the window, cupping his hand over his eyes, trying to see in through the window. "How often do people visit this lady?"

"Kids come to visit now and then, I guess. I don't remember exactly." Chad rang the doorbell and knocked.

"Miss Arnell!"

"She ain't gonna answer." Pengsy tried the locked door.

"With the damage to the window, I'd bet she isn't home. She might have landed in the hospital again."

"She's here." Pengsy kicked in the door, barging in.

"Pengsy..." Chad scowled. "We'll have to fix that."

The bad smell drifted over him, this time in a strong dose of what could have been bad parmesan cheese in rotten vinegar, and his face writhed in a gagging grimace.

That's when he knew what it was, too.

Hand over his nose, he staggered into the living room that was dotted with broken glass, battered frames, and photos, as if someone went crazy on all the pictures that had been set up so meticulously, some on the shelves which were aslant on one wall and knocked down on another.

He reckoned they had done the damage with the hard end of the broom that lay aslant on the recliner chair. The touch-base lamp was on the floor, broken. Intruders were his first

thought until he saw the busted TV and the char marks that suggested the tubes exploded. He remembered the look of horror on Abby's face when he had come up from the basement and found her gawking open-mouthed at the TV.

(The things they get away with these days.)

He could picture her smashing that TV all too easily.

She had taken the broom, smashed every picture in sight, may have accidentally hit the window, but certainly intended to hit the TV. He didn't know how he knew, as if his subconscious picked up on something that hadn't been passed along to the conscious. But he knew.

Pengsy shambled out of the dining room, hand over his nose too, looking a little green. "She's dead."

Chad pulled out his phone. "Bodies don't smell like that alive," he said wanly, and knew she had to have been there for some time to smell that ripe. "How long you think? Weeks?"

"Could be less than a week." Pengsy choked back a gag and hurried out the door to escape the stink.

Chad didn't want to look around the corner into the dining room, knowing he would see nothing pretty, but did.

He glimpsed Abby face-down on the carpet in her robe, her wig nearby like a strange dead animal, things acrawl on her head.

Chad looked away quickly, shuffled outside, and tossed his cookies in the snow.

"I'll make the call." Pengsy snatched his cell phone out of his pocket and Chad couldn't have cared less.

He was trying to stop gagging.

"It's gonna take..." He felt another round of gags coming. "It's gonna take a lot to get that smell out of there," he said to no one in particular while Pengsy talked to a 911 dispatcher. "We'll have to rip out all the carpets."

Yes, he found it was better to think of the carpets.

5

Six months later, Chad sat in his jeep and eyed the house where Abby Arnell had lived. He thought of the odor that lingered even after he and Pengsy replaced the carpets and aired the place out for days. He thought of all the times he had circled the property through the woods after the snow melted and told himself that he wasn't looking for anything in particular, wasn't looking for Danny. He thought of Nina, who had been showing for some time, and he thought of cigarettes.

Chad was more of a thinker lately than he preferred to be and good moods were hard to come by. That morning, he had no shortage of reasons to be grumpy. He had a long work-list and was so backed up that he doubted he would be home for dinner, which could mean more drama from Trish. Pengsy was working with Art Kroppel that day, as happened on and off over the past months under Stuart Sheldon's orders. Chad didn't mind working alone that much, but he didn't like being in *that place* alone.

It was where Danny vanished and Abby died. The coroner had found that her heart went, but that hadn't explained the episode she must have had before or during.

Broken glass. Busted picture frames.

The smashed television.

(The things they get away with these days.)

He saw the scene when he closed his eyes sometimes, a part of his mind still stubborn to make sense of it.

The house unnerved him now.

And the clearing...

There was something about *that* he didn't like either.

Knowing he thought of the property as a place of bad luck, he couldn't scoff at those in town superstitious about that neck of the hill as he once did, even if his reasons had nothing to do

with the spook stories about Ed Hoad.

The history must not have bothered Abby, but he supposed it was a stumbling block in renting her house out now. He had shown the place eighteen times in the past five months and no one bit, even when Stu lowered the rent.

The odds were better that day. As good as they would get. The prospective tenant was an out-of-towner.

The guy was also late, but Chad was reluctant to write him off as a no-show. He wanted badly to fill that vacancy.

An hour later than scheduled, the man showed up. Chad saw his sedan in the rear-view as it turned off Saybrook.

He hoped this would be the last time he had to walk through that house and pretend everything was just dandy and an old woman hadn't died and rotted inside.

All he really wanted was to drive away. Forget about the place. Not look back.

THREE

THE GRIEVING MISTER DUDLEY

1

The road to Hell is paved with good intentions. Follow your heart and it just might take you there. Some learn this the hard way. Some men, like William Dudley, never learn.

His heart told him that the house was perfect for the two of them. It would only be temporary, until he gained better knowledge of the area and found a home to buy, but he could imagine living there for a year, maybe longer, there at 32 Saybrook where the rent was friendly to a teacher's salary, where the undisturbed sounds of nature promised peaceful nights and the forest told of father-and-daughter walks along its winding paths.

High on a hill away from town, the cape house stood out of view from the road. Second house on the drive. The first belonged to an elderly lady who would be their only neighbor.

"Your little one won't find any playmates up here," said Chad the Handyman, as he had introduced himself. "But there's upsides to livin' out of the way of things."

A brawny man with a flat voice and face in need of a shave, he had just finished the what-you-see-is-what-you-get tour of the house and they headed back outside.

"Oh, I'm sure," William said, as Kirsten stirred against his shoulder. She snuggled her face against his neck, tickling his cheek with her blonde hairs, as he came down the steps.

"You won't have to worry about the downtown elements or even cars while she's outside in the yard." The bulge in Chad's

cheek reminded William of his father, who always had tufts of Red Man tucked beside his teeth and a cup for spitting. "Little traffic on Saybrook. You're on the cul-de-sac here besides. You don't find a place much safer for a kid to play, I reckon."

William had thought along the same lines. She would be safe up there. He could not live without that comfort in those dark times when fate had shown itself to be cruel and life frail.

Kirsten would be *safe*.

Dozing in and out, she was due for a nap. She was small for a five year-old, would probably grow up to be petite like her mother, but his arms ached after carrying her through the house.

"You can do what you like with the yard," Chad said. "If your lady is into vegetables or flowers..."

"She was." William felt a jab in his heart. "My wife is no longer with us, I'm afraid." The fact that Chad showed no visible reaction and offered no condolences was almost refreshing. "I'm a single parent. I'm known to dabble with gardening myself though."

"The soil is good here for it." Chad followed William to his sedan and hovered while he buckled Kirsten into her car seat.

William closed the door and wiped a smudge off his glasses with a corner of his shirt. "What about the utilities?"

"Ya'd get those yaself." Chad looked off to his jeep. "Except the water. House has a new water heater if I didn't mention it." He had. "Hardly used appliances to boot."

"How soon would it be available?" William put on his glasses again, blinking, and smiled down at Kirsten through the window.

"Is now." With sloshing noises, Chad chewed.

William drifted away from the car, but not far, and kept shooting glances. He didn't like her out of his sight.

Stop being paranoid, said Deborah's voice in his mind.

You said she would be safe out here. Didn't you?

He had, but it was wise to be cautious. In a world with a God that would strike down a good woman in a senseless accident while she drove home to a husband who adored her and a little girl waiting for her nightly bed-time story about fairies and unicorns, anything could happen.

"The woods," he said inaudibly, thinking of wandering psychos and kidnappers and bears. He fidgeted with his glasses. "Are there a lot of animals out here?"

"I suppose," Chad said. "It *is* the forest."

"Right." They shared a chuckle at William's expense.

Chad thumbed down the driveway. "You'd see less if not for that Betty woman who leaves food out for 'em like she thinks she's Mary fargin Poppins."

He snickered and chewed. Slosh, slosh, slosh.

William remembered his father's undignified death and wondered why anyone would put that garbage in their mouth, inviting dental problems and cancer and...

"You shouldn't chew that," William blurted.

Slosh, slosh, slosh.

"Ain't tobaccuh." Chad produced a crinkled fast-food wrapper and pushed out a big wad of gum into it. "A busy mouth is a happy mouth. I quit smokin', see."

"*Oh*. Outstanding. How long?"

"No matter. Gonna start up again soon." Chad pocketed his litter. "Men are doomed to their ways, Mister Didley."

"Dudley," William corrected.

Chad smiled, but it didn't look natural. "Whatcha think of the house?"

William thought Deborah would have loved it, for its simple charm, hardwood floors, even for the half wall and countertop which connected the kitchen to the dining room, but most of all its secluded setting and *the view*.

From where he stood on the edge of the pavement, the

ground sloped down into Sutton Valley, which lay open in a picturesque sprawl. Yes, Deborah would have been happy here.

Her happiness is all he ever wanted.

That was why when he had learned of a job opening in the Sutton Valley School District, he applied. Why he faxed a watered-down resume, knowing he was overqualified to teach seventh grade History and would never land the job otherwise. Why--when he decided to move away from the dangers of the city and its poor education system that could only disservice Kirsten's future--he chose the town where his Deborah grew up, where her family and friends were whom she yearned to be closer to, where he couldn't have imagined in his worst nightmares would be the town, when the time came to move, where his wife was buried.

He could see the edge of Homeland Cemetery from where he stood. "I'd like to have an application."

"None to have," Chad said. "Mister Boggs is old and not a stickler."

"There are no other takers?"

"Naw. Yours if you want it."

William looked away, gaze roaming the car, a warning bell ringing out in the backwoods of his mind like a distant knell. "Ours just like that?"

"Just like magic," Chad said dully. "Providin' you swing the deposit and first month's."

"That's no problem, but..." William swung his gaze for another look at the house and it hitched on something he hadn't noticed till now.

It stood in the big weedy plot between the end of the cul-de-sac and the forest. If William had come at night, his headlights would have hit it dead-on when he parked.

The freezer, an old General Electric upright, must have

been white before the years turned it putrid yellow and swatched it with filth. It did not blend there. It *stood out*. He must have looked that way a dozen times and couldn't believe he missed it.

Children die in those things, said a paranoid voice inside. *They climb in, get trapped, suffocate, die. Children Kirsten's age. How bout that, Mister Didley?*

"Why is that freezer out there?"

"Freezer?" Chad glanced. "What..." He looked again, sharply, and scratched the corner of his mouth with a callused finger, pausing. "That."

"Isn't it illegal to have the door on the hinges?"

"I believe it is." Chad sounded troubled and William was glad he shared his concern. "That." He swallowed, blinking. "That's a leftover from the house that used to be there."

"Torn down?"

"Burned down. Years ago. That thing..." His voice lowered. "We need to haul off and junk. Eye-sore it is."

"Why haven't you?"

"Keep forgetting," Chad said, and repeated it softly. "I'll make arrangements to have it removed."

William was relieved. "Would you take a check?"

"If it's in-state." Chad glanced at his New York license plate. "Which I reckon yours is. I've got the paperwork in m'jeep. Does this mean--"

"Yes." William looked down into town with a sad smile. He felt close to Deborah in this place.

"We'll take it."

2

That night, after running errands such as gathering boxes, William returned to the apartment in Adamstown where he and Deborah had lived for the past five years,

roughly since they wedded and Kirsten was born. There he cooked a dinner more suited to three than two and ate very little. He had shed twenty pounds in the last three months, but wasn't on a diet. His appetite wasn't what it was before Deborah died. He joked to others that it was because she was a much better cook. The truth was he found it hard to eat with his stomach tied in knots, as it had been ever since the funeral three months ago, which had been too unreal to bring any semblance of closure.

Sometimes it seemed to only be a scene from a bad dream that he had yet to wake up from, but would in time.

Sometimes when he came home, he expected to find her cooking in the kitchen or sitting in the rocking chair in the living room while she tore through another paperback novel and a fresh cup of tea steamed on the end-table beside her. The feeling that she could walk into a room at any moment came often and always left a painful void in its wake that he managed to suppress before Kirsten, so she wouldn't ask why he was crying or looked so sad. He could only hold the strong face for so long, however, before he had to distract himself. His grief was a monster and it had the most power whenever he sat still.

Once the leftovers were put away and dishes done, he started packing. He would have to do it all alone. It had been Deborah's thing, but he tried not to think about *that*. He kept his mind working on all that needed to be done.

Busy was best.

Moving, he told himself, was best too, because staying in that apartment that was so rich with memories meant condemning himself to live with ghosts and could-have-beens.

As he duct-taped a box he had packed with books and looked over to Kirsten, who played on the floor with ponies and her teddy bear Mister Ben, William thought the move would

be best for her too. A change in scenery was probably the best way to help her adapt to this strange new world with Mommy in Heaven and Daddy's bad cooking on her dinner plate each night.

Oh, Willie, I think we know what this is really about, said a knowing voice inside. It's been months and you haven't gotten much better. I think we know who's having the trouble adapting.

And he shut it out, and grabbed the next box.

At ten o'clock, William took Kirsten into her room for bed. Not so long ago, eight-thirty had been her bed-time and nine William's as he used to be an early bird by nature. Lately, he had trouble waking up and never went to bed until he was dead tired and knew sleep would come swiftly. To lay in the dark waiting for it was to invite whatever thoughts or demons might come. Their sleeping schedules had been askew because of it.

In her blue Snow White nightgown with Mister Ben held close to her chest and blonde hair in pigtails, Kirsten climbed into bed. William read from one of her storybooks about a troll under a bridge and managed to keep the tremble out of his voice. This used to be Deborah's and Kirsten's special time together. It was still special indeed. It was terrible too, because during those moments, Deborah's death never felt more real.

Once the story was over, William kissed Kirsten on the forehead and went back to packing. Busy was best.

For a while, he forgot the reasons why he was trying to distract himself again. That changed when he began filling a box with Deborah's knick-knacks which would surely be unpacked at the new house, and his thoughts turned to all her things that would *not* be unpacked. That might never be. Relics of a life that stopped stowed away in boxes that might as well have had *DO NOT OPEN TILL JUDGMENT DAY*

written on them, they would be destined to rot amongst the shadows and dust bunnies of the basement at the rental on Saybrook Road in Sutton Valley and then later, when he found a house to buy, he moved to a more permanent tomb just like it.

Look on the bright side, a friend had told him days after the funeral. *Don't think about her death. Think about her life. Think about all the wonderful memories you'll be left with and how your life will be enriched by having known her and loved her.*

Oh yes. Look on the bright side indeed.

Only those who had no concept of grief--what it felt like to die inside, over and over again every time one admits to themselves that the person that made them whole now lay in a black pocket of the wormy earth and there was nothing anyone could do--could serve such a dish of crap.

When William looked ahead, all he saw was her tombstone and boxes that would never be opened. In the ways that mattered, to a man whose heart could not see through the black place where his hope used to be, that was all he would have left of her.

Crouched over the box of knick-knacks, a miniature rocking horse in one hand and a Grandma Teddy Bear knitting in the other, William dropped them in. A sob jerked out of him and he snapped upright, staggering as if drunk.

The tears welled as he shambled into his bedroom.

His hand trembling, he flicked the switch beside the closet.

The shadow of his stiff body thrown across the empty bed, he stood before the open closet where Deborah's dresses hung waiting for nothing, unaware that his eyes were wide and disturbed, as if they peered through the gates to some unfathomable place that was maddening to behold.

He stayed that way for a long time.

3

Two weeks later in Sutton Valley, a yellow Ryder truck struggled up Saybrook Road and stopped beside trash cans that had smiley faces drawn on them in black marker. William coaxed the truck onto the drive that was scattered with birdseed. The wheels crushed rotting fruits and vegetables, a strange buffet that ranged along one side of the pavement.

William angled the truck and parked, not far from the three cars of those who had arrived early. Two of Deborah's cousins with their wives. Deborah's Uncle James, brother of her father Joe Rendell who had arranged the "welcome wagon" as he called it. William had told him it was unnecessary and he could handle the unloading himself, wanted to, but Joe wouldn't be denied.

Four more people showed soon after.

Yet another cousin. Friends of Deborah and her family.

William hadn't wanted this, had no desire for the attention, but was touched by how many came to pitch a hand. They made him feel welcome, but also dark because Deborah was their favorite subject. Each time they reminisced, often starting it off with variations of "*I remember when Deborah...*" or "*Deb used to love to...*", William responded with a nod or a simple "yes". Nothing more. He was having another weak day. The grief was a weight on his heart, a strain on his soul, but he had to stay strong.

For Kirsten. She was all he had now.

She was also all Deborah's parents had left of their only child, so he expected to see them often. That was fine. Kirsten needed as much family as he could give her, and Joe and Mary were as supportive as in-laws come. They lived across town,

where Kirsten would spend two or three days while William settled the house. Mary looked after her there that day and Joe came to help with the move-in, at least as much he could with his bad back.

Around dinner, William saw Joe leaning against his blue Saturn. Clad in jeans and a *#1 Grandpa* tee-shirt, the sun gleaming off his barren scalp, Joe looked almost dazed as he stared toward the forest.

William thought of the freezer, looked for it as he approached.

He didn't see it.

"Thanks for rounding up the help." William stood beside him. "I expected to be carrying boxes well into the night."

Joe glanced at the truck. "There's not much left."

"We're making good time. I think I'll return the truck tonight and get my car."

"Why not," Joe said distantly, and scanned the weedy plot. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I wish you had run this by me first before you signed anything."

"For the house?"

Joe nodded in a grave way that William didn't like. "You don't know how spooky it is for me to be standing here. Coming to visit will take getting used to."

"Why?"

"There used to be a house here." Joe pointed off toward the weeds. "Thirty-four Saybrook. I had a friend named Gary Hoad who lived there. When I was a boy. We used to play in these woods." His face hinted a smile that never came. "I'm sure we even played right where we're standing." He pressed his lips together. "Every town has at least one place that people find troubling. You landed next door to ours. You would have, anyway, if it was still here."

William believed history was meant to be learned from,

not feared, but he couldn't stop his negative gut reaction about places where something bad had happened, one that came just as easily to the least superstitious, as if the bad thing forever left a mark that some latent, perhaps primal, sense could detect. "Please tell me nobody was murdered."

"There was no evidence it happened here," Joe said, which was answer enough, and led William partway into the clearing. "The Hoads had a rocky marriage. Ed was a card who spent his free time finding the bottom of brown bottles and writing stories. Dark stories." He crossed his arms and stiffened, as if hugging himself from a cold draft that only he felt. "His life got dark too."

"You know what they say about art imitating life." William adjusted his glasses. "What happened here?"

"Barbara Hoad vanished one day and partly due to his odd behavior, Ed fell under suspicion. The police might have been onto something. Ed disappeared some weeks later and so did his son, my friend Gary." Joe shook his head. "They found evidence of a struggle and some blood. Signs of foul play. Ed and Gary never turned up as far as I know. Over fifty years now."

William frowned that a woman might be buried in the woods nearby. "It would've been nice if that Chad guy mentioned this."

"They're not obligated to tell you anything because you're renting. But even so, it's old news. He may not have thought it relevant. After all, there was never any to-do about these other houses. The one you're moving in. The same lady lived there for the past fifty years. Abby Arnell. One nice lady."

A smile surfaced on Joe's face, and fell dead away.

"Then Rich Winslow moved into the Hoad house with his new bride." Joe cleared his throat. "I forgot to mention the family that moved in before him. The O'Deas. Kept to themselves for the ten or so months they stayed. Then one day

they up and moved out. Nobody knows why. They got out of town. Lord knows where they went. The fact that they did it in a hurry and left so much behind. Well, folks like to speculate about that, given the history of the place."

"I see." William frowned. His happy thoughts about the property were leaving him. "And the Winslows?"

"They lived there about four years before Ella left the marriage. She said the house was evil."

William gave a chuckle, but what lingered beneath it wasn't humorous.

"Ella was known to say all kinds of cockamamie things. But you know how people are in a small town. They get to talking. The stories spread around and get embellished along the way. Especially when Rich went off his nut and burned down the house, some think with him in it. The police thought he torched it and jumped town. That sounds more likely to me. Richie was too self-impressed for suicide, I think."

"You knew him?"

"A little." Joe craned his head, his eyes grave.

Then came an unexpected chuckle and wink.

The tension waned and William sighed with a smile.

"That was good." He scratched at the corner of his mouth and snickered. "Do all the new people in town get the same initiation?"

Joe tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

"You know. The put-on about the house."

"I wasn't making it up," Joe said, his tone flat. "But I'm sure that house wasn't as *evil* as crazy Ella Winslow said. You'd have to be a nut to believe a nut. Either that or gullible. Are you gullible?"

"No."

"Then you'll do fine up here. All I'm saying is that you might run into some folks who believe in the wild stories about

this hill, but don't let them give you the spooks." Joe shrugged and they headed for the truck. "There's nothing left of that old house anyway."

4

Late that night, William began unpacking. He knew he wouldn't be able to sleep unless he had some of it done, if even then. Most boxes contained a hodgepodge of things, a testament to why Deborah had dubbed him Mister Miscellaneous. She had been the organized one. No doubt.

Before long, he found himself looking for his music CDs in vain. The cable wasn't on yet and his radio, which he feared may have broken somehow in transit, picked up nothing.

The silence of the house burrowed into him, its emptiness contagious. With no one around to look strong for, he allowed himself to unhinge. He lay on the couch in the small hours, remembering the warmth of Deborah's touch and her smile when she looked at him, and he wept.

5

Outside, the wind picked up.

Beyond the reach of the exterior light, off to the right of the house through the swaying weeds and toward the woods, whispers rose out of nowhere. Leaves rustled and fluttered. They shifted the shadows, fraying the moonlight that danced on the dirty face of an old freezer. The whispers came from the blackness that lay behind the door.

Slightly ajar, it stirred soundlessly in the breeze.

A raccoon scuttled out of the woods nearby, looking for food and heading toward a place where it always found some. It dined regularly on the scraps Betty Morgan left on the driveway and had passed the freezer along the way many

times, but not always.

Sometimes the freezer wasn't there.

When it was, the raccoon gave it little regard.

Except tonight.

The door halted while the wind remained steady.

The animal stopped, sensing a change and for a moment *danger* without knowing why. He raised his head, sniffing.

The door creaked wider open, the sound like a chuckle from a throat full of dirt, and the smell that escaped was one he knew.

Abby Arnell had regularly left a bowl of food on her back steps for her cat, which came and went as it pleased and wisely never challenged the raccoon when he helped himself. Whenever he caught that scent, he sought it out.

This time was no exception.

The raccoon waddled to the freezer, pitched back on his back legs, and leaned on the edge of the interior floor. Moonlight spilled over him onto the food, which he saw piled on a white surface. It was a feast. Just for him. All for him.

He climbed inside and went to eat.

The scent vanished. The food was gone and a moment later, so was the light. The door slammed shut.

With creaks and thuds, the freezer stirred.

Then it was still.

The door jerked open a notch and swung slowly on its croaking hinge, a rotten mouth opening in the cold light of the moon--the only witness.

FOUR

NEIGHBORS

1

William had the unpacking done by the second night, but Deborah's parents asked to keep Kirsten another day. He had lied when he told Joe that he didn't mind. He didn't want to spend another night alone and he felt nervous whenever Kirsten was away from him. He trusted Joe and Mary more than he did anyone, but it made him nervous nonetheless.

He distracted himself by driving around and having a look at the town and the school where he would teach. Later, he tried to read and couldn't focus. His thoughts kept wandering to unpleasant things. The silence which he preferred in a former life ate into him. He watched TV then.

Lying on the couch, he drifted off to the drone of the TV and the wind blowing through the trees outside. Now and then, he heard a creaking sound, a hoarse and rotten noise, like the sound of an old coffin opening and closing.

Dreams of Homeland Cemetery, where fog hazed the air and the dead moaned beneath cold stones, troubled his sleep.

He woke up late and groggy.

His spirits lifted when Kirsten came home.

He followed her around the house, which looked more like a home now instead of a warehouse of boxes. "What do you think?"

"I like it, Daddy," she said, a little uncertainly. "What about our other house?"

"Oh, honey. This is home now. It'll be better, just you see." His smile waned a little at her down-turned eyes.

"Wanna see your room? I set up all your toys."

"Okay." When she walked into her room, where her stuffed animals ranged across shelves and dollies sat on their rocking chairs at her little table that was set for tea, her eyes lit up. "It looks so pretty, Daddy."

He stood in the doorway smiling as she played, told himself that things really were going to be all right, and slinked away.

Minutes later, while he was alphabetizing books on the living room shelf, Kirsten appeared with an armful of dolls and her favorite teddy bear. "Mister Ben wants to have a picnic with the babies. Can we go out and have a picnic?"

He leaned down, smiling. "You bet." He cocked his head. "As long as I'm invited. Am I?"

"Okay. But you have to make the tea."

"Ah." He chuckled. "Your wish is my command, princess."

He laid out her plastic plates, teacups, and wrapped up play-food in a dishtowel which he set in a pink Easter basket. As Kirsten carried out their esteemed guests, he finished setting the scene on an old tablecloth he had spread on the front yard.

They spent the afternoon there in the sun and warm breeze, while squirrels darted through the trees and his neighbor Betty Morgan, a woman in her seventies with a full head of silver hair, weeded and tended to the tomato plants that flanked her house.

The picnic wound down when Mister Ben came down with a tummy ache from too much plastic fruit and the dollies took a nap, using a corner of the tablecloth as a blanket. Too early and nice of a day to pack it in, Kirsten crayoned pictures and William read some Jules Verne in a lawnchair.

He caught glances of Betty now and then, puttering

around her yard with an apron and gardening gloves. His eyes on his book and ears tuned to Kirsten humming tunes known only to her, he didn't notice when Betty approached.

"It's such a wonderful day out," she said right next to him, giving him a start.

He bolted up and his book tumbled on the grass.

Betty put a hand over her chest, pressing her lips together in a wistful smile. "I'm sorry." She reached to his shoulder as if to pat it, but came short. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"That's fine. I just wasn't expecting..." He chuckled, embarrassed.

She widened her smile. Her teeth looked too perfect to be real, but her full head of silver hair surely was. She was a beautiful lady. If Marilyn Monroe had lived to see her seventies, she might have looked a lot like Betty Morgan.

"I noticed you two out here enjoying the weather. We had yet to be acquainted so I came to..." She pursed her lips and pitched her head from side to side in a silly sort of way. "Say hello. Are you all settled in? If you or your wife ever need anything, don't hesitate to knock."

"That's very kind of you, thanks." William let the wife reference pass without comment.

Betty removed her gloves and turned, leaning with her hands to her knees. "And who is this young lady?"

Not acknowledging her, Kirsten went on drawing.

"This is my daughter Kirsten," William said, drawing Betty's blue eyes, and smirked when he saw Kirsten sneak a glance up.

"What a lovely name." She offered her hand, palm down, as if inviting a kiss on the knuckle. "I'm Betty."

He shook her hand gently. "William Dudley."

Betty inclined her head. "So are you a Will? Or a Bill?"

"I'd be a William."

"Good for you." She smiled, the kind of smile that lights up the whole face. It reminded him of Deborah's.

"Hi, Betty." Kirsten looked up, her blue eyes assessing her behind locks of blond hair. "You're invited too."

Betty hunched over and gaped her mouth in an O of mock surprise. "I am? Why I haven't been invited to a tea party in such a very long time."

"It's not a tea party. It's a picnic."

"A picnic with tea?"

"Uh-huh."

"How delightful," Betty said, a sparkle in her eyes. "Why, I would be honored."

If Betty wasn't so obviously sincere and good with children, he might have worried about Kirsten's exchange with this woman, who was only a notch shy of being a stranger. Then again, many of William's inner voices were paranoid ones and he was insecure. Betty was a threat to him only in the pettiest of ways.

"Do you want to know a secret?" Betty asked her.

Kirsten nodded, wide-eyed.

"I had a daughter Annie who had blonde curls like yours."

"Really?" Kirsten said, as if that was pretty neat. "Can she play outside with me?"

"No, dear." Betty's smile never frayed. "Because Annie's in heaven with the angels now."

"With the *angels*." Kirsten gasped that word, amazed. "My mommy is too."

Betty glanced at William and exchanged wistful nods.

Kirsten began nodding too. "And you don't have to worry cuz my mommy will take good care of her."

William smiled sadly.

"And God them both," Betty said. "I'm glad you told me that. I feel... so much better now."

His eyes went astray, looking more inward than out.

"What are you drawing?" Betty asked in a changing-the-subject tone.

"That's Mommy and Mister Ben," Kirsten said, proud.

"Mister Ben is your teddy bear?" Betty gestured to him where he sat in the basket. "This one."

"Yeah," Kirsten said in awe. "How did you know?"

"Why, you're such a good artist, how could I not?"

Kirsten grinned, straightening. "A very good artist."

"And so humble too." Betty gave William the *dear me* look that seemed to be the exclusive province of grandmothers, and looked at the picture again. "How nice. They're holding hands."

Kirsten's smile fell away. "Mister Ben misses Mommy."

Betty nodded. "And I bet you do too."

Looking down, Kirsten shrugged.

Tears welled in William's eyes and he drifted away. When he found himself staring down into Sutton Valley toward the cemetery, he forced his gaze elsewhere.

"You'll see her again some day," Betty told her. "Just like I'll see my loved ones. I believe that. And I believe everything happens for a reason."

Kirsten looked at her uncertainly. "Everything?"

"Everything."

As William turned, his gaze snatched a flash of something in the far weeds beyond the cul-de-sac, and he double-taked at what stood by the tree-line.

His head tilted, eyes blinked, brows furrowed.

Betty and Kirsten were still talking, but the sound trailed away from him.

His attention was on *the freezer*, the nasty old upright that he would have sworn on a stack of bibles had not been there the past three days.

Absurdly, he wondered if someone brought it back.

Surely it was never hauled away, as he had presumed on the day he moved in when he purposely looked for it. Somehow he had missed it, and hadn't noticed it yesterday or today until now.

"It's been there for years," Betty said beside him, causing him to twitch. The woman was as stealthy as a cat it seemed. "I don't know why Henry tolerates it being there instead of just getting rid of it. It's rubbish."

"I don't like it."

Betty pulled her lips between her teeth, shaking her head. "It's unsightly. Harmless but unsightly."

William wasn't so sure about the harmless part.

That evening, he called his landlord and voiced his concerns about it.

"I'll have..." Mister Boggs's voice fell away.

William thought he lost him. "Hello?"

"I'll have one of the boys get that out of there. Soon as possible."

"I'd appreciate that. Thank you."

2

Two miles away, eighty-five year-old Henry Boggs hung up his rotary phone with a grimace. His liver-spotted hand lingered on the receiver as he looked at the paper on the wall. Dust clung to the ancient scotch tape that held it there and the important numbers it framed were scrawled with a shaky arthritic hand. He called those numbers often, but seldom remembered them without a refresher. The mind was the first thing to go, it seemed.

He kept forgetting about that fridge, too, until reminded. How many times over the years had Abby Arnell called him about it, how many times had he called one of the guys to take

care of it, he didn't know, but it felt like a lot and something about that felt wrong. Very wrong.

That fridge. That blasted...

Only it wasn't a fridge, he reminded himself. It was a freezer, the one Ed Hoad had bought to please his Barbara before things went horribly wrong in their home. At 34 Saybrook, it had been right next door to where Henry and Martha first lived as newlyweds, a cape house Henry still owned, where William Dudley had just called from. Though Henry kept forgetting about the freezer--kept forgetting a lot of things, truth be told, much of which he wished he remembered--he hadn't once forgotten the Hoads.

Some things can't be forgotten.

They are chiseled into the bedrock of a man's heart.

Good God, they had been *his* neighbors. His friends.

He knew Ed had problems and was eccentric, as artist types tended to be, but he blamed himself for many years for not taking notice to just how sick Ed had been before it was too late. What became of Barbara and Gary, that sweet little boy, Henry never liked to think about. It didn't require much imagination to figure it out. The last time Henry laid eyes on Ed, his clothes were dotted with blood and eyes filled with lunacy.

(I DIDN'T KILL MY SON! I DIDN'T KILL MY FAMILY!)

After Ed vanished, the only thing that had been worse than knowing what Ed must have done was knowing that Ed was still out there and as sick as sin. The fear of him coming back, rational or not, had been one of Martha's reasons for not wanting to stay on Saybrook, living next to that monument to a grisly business only the devil might know.

Nothing ever felt right on that hill since.

It was the center of all things strange in Sutton Valley, stemming back to those black days of 1956, of which the only relic was that freezer. Why Richard Winslow took so many

things out of the house in '64, superficial things like the freezer, was as mysterious as why he went loopy and burned down the house.

When Henry bought that property years later, he sent a crew to clean up the leftovers, everything Rich Winslow had hauled out into the yard half a decade ago and had been rotting there since. That freezer had been on the list. He couldn't remember the name of the boy he had in charge, only that he swore up-and-down that they took the freezer too.

But he couldn't have.

It seemed to Henry that he sent someone to collect it many times since, yet it might be that he misremembered. He might have misremembered the occasions when Abby called to complain too. That was possible. An old fridge that kept popping back where it was, like a weed that kept growing back. That surely wasn't.

"What was his name?" Henry was hung up on the name of the boy who ran that clean-up crew. He had talked about him recently. It bothered him that he remembered then but not now.

He knew that was in '70 or '71. A year or two after Roger--*no, Ray, or was it Ron?*--Morgan did a disappearing act of his own on Betty. Not long before Martha passed away with the cancer.

He sighed and let his thoughts roll to her, but it was one of those days when she was a blur and nothing saddened him more.

How was it that he could remember the love so well, the feeling that came from being with her, but draw only the haziest image when trying to conjure her face? Perhaps things that happen inside are best remembered.

"Oh, Martha," he said with his unsteady voice and paused, letting it pass.

Henry squinted at his chicken-scratch on the wall. His gaze stopped on the name CHAD, he adjusted his reading glasses, and he focused on the number beside it. Chad might or might not be there, but Henry could leave a message or try Chad's cell phone, a device that still boggled Henry's mind. He remembered a time when the idea of someone being able to carry a phone around with them wherever they went was a thing of science fiction.

Not unless they had a very *long* cord.

He brought the receiver to his head, raised a shaky hand, slid his finger into a number hole, and froze.

The dial tone became a busy signal.

Why was I going to call Chad?

Someone had called him ... about something.

He lowered his hand. His mouth ajar, he licked his bottom lip which had gone dry and racked his brain which had gone blank. He squinted at the phone through his glasses, blinked, blinked again, and his eyes went astray.

The shame crept in.

He wasn't sure now if he still held the phone from the forgotten conversation or meant to call someone now.

Grumbling, he stuck the receiver back on the cradle and walked away. Shambling in a robe and slippers, he returned to the living room where the dead smiled along the walls in dusty frames, gazing from memories beyond the reach of his mind, frozen forever in their dead ages.

The dead smile because dead is better, he sometimes thought. *Being dead means to be among friends*.

But he wasn't looking at the pictures now.

He didn't see their black-and-white smiles fray or their eyes follow him as he shuffled to his cushioned chair. He settled into it behind his TV tray that held his tea, TV remote, and the crossword puzzle he had been working on.

By the time he came up with a five letter word for

dreariness, he forgot his phone ever rang.

3

Kirsten had slept in William's bed for the first few nights, which was understandable being in a new place. William didn't mind. The night Kirsten slept in her own room, he didn't sleep well. He kept getting up at all hours to check on her.

The next night, as they watched TV in the bedroom, William asked Kirsten if she would sleep in Daddy's room.

She looked up at him thoughtfully. "Are you lonely?"

He told her he was, and the way Kirsten saw through him heartened him as much as it scared him sometimes.

"It'll be okay, Daddy," Kirsten said. "You've got me."

William crouched and hugged her. "I sure do."

"I would never go away."

He frowned at her tone. "Oh, honey. You know Mommy didn't want to go. You know that, right?"

"I know." She pulled away, looked up with her mother's bright blue eyes. "What if you go away?"

"I'll never go away. You're stuck with me. Forever."

"But Mommy didn't want to go and she did," Kirsten said, and William wasn't sure how to contend with that logic. "So you might go away. Even if you don't want to."

William only shook his head and kept his eyes on hers, which threatened tears.

"Don't ever go away."

"Never." He hugged her, running his fingers through her hair and snuggling his face against hers. "That's a promise."

"Promise *promise*?"

"Pinky swear." They locked pinky fingers.

"You've got Mister Ben too." Kirsten held him up. "I'll let

you play with him."

"Really?" William took the teddy bear when she offered, holding him by the paws.

"Uh-huh."

He thought of the night that Deborah had brought it home for Kirsten to make up for working late and missing story-time. Kirsten had insisted she was going to stay up and wait for Mommy, but by then, she was asleep on her side with the covers off and a Disney book held tight to her chest. Deborah had carefully removed the book and maneuvered the bear into its place. The next morning, Kirsten was excited as if Christmas had come early. Deborah told her the bear was magic and whispered a secret in her ear that made her eyes widen and smile spread. When William asked to be let in on it, Kirsten put a finger to her nose--"Shshsh..."-- and Deborah winked when she said, *If we told you, it wouldn't be a secret any more, silly*. Kirsten started calling the bear Mister Ben the same day. Where she came up with the name, he wasn't sure, but suspected a box of rice had a hand in it.

"That's sweet, honey." William ran his thumbs across Mister Ben's soft fur. "But then what will you play with?"

Kirsten shrugged. "Sumfin else."

"Here." William set Mister Ben on the couch between them. "I'll share him."

"Like we share at school." Kirsten didn't refer to real school, as she would only start kindergarten that fall, but the day-care center they had enrolled her in. "Miss Geeney says if you don't share, you're not nice."

"No, it's not nice."

"Shannon didn't wanna share. She *lost a star* by her name."

"Yikes. Sounds like a bad thing."

"It is."

"I bet you miss your friends at school."

Kirsten glanced down. "Sometimes."

"September will be here before you know it and you'll be back in school again with other kids. It's too bad there's none to play with here."

"You play with me. Grandpa plays with me. General plays with me too."

William quirked a brow. "General?"

"He's fun." Kirsten rolled her eyes. "For *a boy*."

"Is he?" William snickered but wondered. "Where did you see him?"

"In my room."

"Oh." He scratched his chin. "How come I didn't meet him?"

"You can't see him."

William suspected as much. Kirsten had imaginary friends before and he supposed this new one was her way of dealing with her new surroundings.

"Why General?" He watched her face go blank. "Why did you... why does *he* call himself General? That's a silly name."

"Boys are silly."

"Then that must mean I'm silly."

"You're not a boy." She giggled. "You're growned-up."

Her face suddenly became serious. She pressed her lips together and shook her head with wide eyes. "General doesn't like it here, Daddy."

William frowned a little. "No? Is it really General who doesn't like it here? Could it be you too?"

"I don't think so."

William took that as a yes. "Okay."

Kirsten leaned. "General says we shouldn't stay here."

"How come?"

Her eyes slid to the side and the graveness in his little girl's eyes caused a chill inside him. "Cuz of the scary thing,"

she said in a near whisper. "Outside. In the dark."

"There's nothing to be scared of out there."

"But General said--"

A knock came to the door.

William rose, wondering. He hadn't heard a car or seen any lights through the picture window, but figured he missed it while his attention had been on Kirsten. "Stay there, honey."

When he opened the door, he expected to see Joe or maybe Chad the gum-chomping handyman. Instead, he saw Betty Morgan. Clad in a hooded pink raincoat buttoned to the throat, she held out a tupperware container loaded with something that oozed out the sides.

"Good evening, William," she said.

"Why hello." He glanced over her shoulder to the outside, where it was not raining, and gave a smile when he looked at the container. "What's this?"

"Just a little something." Betty raised her eyes and tilted her head from side to side. "Chicken and green bean casserole. I thought to myself, now wouldn't it be wonderful if I brought William some."

"You shouldn't have," he said, and meant it.

"I always have extras, because I'm so used to cooking big meals from the days when my husband was in the house." She held it up with a smile and twinkle. "This used to be his favorite and I think he would be just saddened if any went to waste."

"Hi Betty!" Kirsten said, giving him a start.

She had crept up beside him.

"Hello there," Betty said, delighted. "Shouldn't you be in bed?"

"Not yet. Do you want to have another tea party?"

William stifled a groan.

"No, dear. It's late and little girls need their sleep." Betty

leaned, smiling. "At my age, I need my sleep too. Perhaps this weekend."

"Sure!"

"Thank you." William took the container and might have been more touched by this gesture if he hadn't known the usual recipients of her extras. For all he knew, people rated about the same as the wildlife in her mind. The lady left food out everywhere for the animals. He had spotted her dispersing it on a couple nights, once on the end of the cul-de-sac, which was off her property, but it was too petty a thing to complain about. "I'll have the container back to you when we're finished."

Betty waved a dismissive hand. "Oh. There's no need." She winked at Kirsten, took a deep breath, and drew back. "Enjoy."

"We will." William told himself that she was a harmless lady whose good heart made up for her quirks, and thanked her for her offering heartily.

Even though he had no intention of eating it.
And didn't.

4

William and Kirsten spent their days seeing the local sites, discovering good places to eat and get ice cream, going to visit Grandma and Grandpa Rendell who smothered her with attention, and of course doing stuff outside. Mister Ben held a number of activities and William catered happily.

Kirsten took Mister Ben with her the afternoon they took a nature walk, exploring the paths through the woods. One led them behind the houses and William spotted Betty in her backyard where clothes swayed on a line.

Smiling her sunny smile, talking to no one, Betty threw

tufts of bread from a plastic grocery bag.

If only she did that just in her yard.

They emerged from the woods in the clearing beside the cul-de-sac, and that's when he saw *it* again.

He stopped, taking hold of Kirsten.

"Daddy?" Kirsten looked. "What's that?"

"Something that shouldn't be there," he said sourly.

He had called Mister Boggs a second time four days before. Boggs had given him Chad the handyman's number and assured him the freezer would be gone that day, just as Chad did two days after that when William called him instead. William had seen Chad's jeep and a pickup truck on the driveway early that morning and assumed they had come to haul the freezer away.

But the awful thing was still there.

William didn't know how it could be. It wasn't there when he and Kirsten left for their walk. He knew that he had looked in the right spot too. He had memorized that spot.

He told himself that he would find something to mark it, something colorful, unmistakable, but he wouldn't do it now with Kirsten with him. He didn't want her anywhere near it. He imagined it toppling over on her or some animal that took up residence inside leaping out and biting her.

"I don't want you to ever go near that," William told her. "Someone's going to take it away soon." *Or I'll do it myself*, he thought. "Because it's dangerous."

"Is there food in there?"

"No. It's old and needs to be taken by the garbage man. And it's dangerous because it will give you boo-boos."

However redundant the statement, he had to add that last part to reinforce the first. Boo-boos were serious business.

"Okay?"

"Okay," Kirsten said, and they went to the house.

William called Chad immediately. His outrage wouldn't

let him wait. It rang until voice mail kicked in and he didn't leave a message. Not this time. He called again every twenty minutes. An hour later, he got through.

"Uh-yup?" a voice answered.

"Hello, *Chad*." William scowled. "This is William Dudley at thirty-two Saybrook." He opened his mouth to mention the freezer and changed his mind. "I have a problem at the house. It needs immediate attention." He heard the juicy slosh of Chad chewing gum. "How soon can you come?"

"Somethin with the pipes?"

"I need you to come see for yourself."

"Tools."

"Excuse me?"

"Tools. I need to know what tools to bring."

William clenched his teeth. "Just come."

He hung up and waited by the phone, expecting Chad to call back. But he didn't.

A half hour later while William was cooking an early dinner, Kirsten yelled that someone was there. William turned down the heat on the noodles, told her to stay put, and went outside into the failing light to confront that *someone*.

William stomped toward the jeep with Chad still in the seat, rummaging around, and he stopped beside the window. "Thanks for coming," he said with an edge.

"Mister Didley." Chad produced a small flashlight, clicking it on and off. "What seems to be the--"

"Turn on your headlights." William glanced at the weeds.

"My headlights?" Chad looked blank.

Crossing arms, William said, "Your high beams."

Chad turned them on, raising a brow. "Now what? Hop on one foot and rub my belly?"

William craned his head. "Look."

Chad did, a look of befuddlement crossed his face, and

William gave him room when he got out. William said nothing as Chad shuffled out in front of the jeep. The headlights threw his shadow over the clearing and trees, the shape of a ghostly giant beside the old freezer that stood exposed in the light. For a long moment Chad stood there, feet apart, hands cupped to the sides of his head. He looked like a man beholding a crashed flying saucer.

William didn't know what to make of that reaction and was too peeved to care. "I asked many times for that to be removed. Now I'm demanding it."

Still gawking at the freezer, Chad didn't move.

"If it isn't taken care of in two days then I will start looking for a new--"

"It will be." Chad turned, his jaw slack as if the big wad of gum weighed it down. "You have my word it will, Mister Didley. My word."

"Thank you." William started away and gave a backward glance, pausing. "And my name is Dudley."

"That's what I said." Chad looked at the freezer again.

William went back into the house, where Kirsten played with blocks in the living room, and he switched on the outside lights. He headed for the kitchen and strayed to a window, where he moved a curtain and looked out.

Chad was still there. He faced the direction of the freezer with a sleeve rolled up, but his head was down as he wrote something with a pen.

He was writing on his arm.

FIVE

HEAD HOLES

1

Chad drove away from the Saybrook property in an empty-headed daze, not sure why he had been there or where he was going or what he was supposed to be doing, as if a hole had opened in his head and everything fell through it. He often felt the same early in the morning whenever he had to leave the house in a hurry without his coffee jumpstart, or when he was dog tired after a long day. He didn't feel tired. He didn't feel quite awake either. The cool air rushing through his window into his face helped, but chilled his arms. He pushed down the sleeves of his flannel shirt that he had rolled up to...

To what?

Scowling, he produced from his breast pocket a pack of gum that he wished was something else. The fantasy of a cigarette took hold. He thought of the feel of it, the smell, the taste, the feeling of relief after the first glorious drags, and when the impulse came to swing by a gas station to pick up a pack, he stomped it flat and loaded two sticks of gum between his teeth.

His cell phone rang and he snatched it off the passenger seat. "Uh-yup?"

"It's me," his wife said, with Caroline and Buck arguing in the background over something of hers that Buck found and decided was his from the sounds of it. It wouldn't be the first time or the last.

"Hello me. Still at your parents?"

"We just got home," Trish said dourly. "That's why I called. To let you know we're back at the house. Caroline complained the entire time. Buck was a nightmare. On the way to Erie. On the way back. While we were there."

Chad bit down hard on his gum and rolled his eyes.

"My parents took us to lunch," Trish went on, "and he had one of his tantrums in front of everyone. Screaming. Flailing."

"The works, huh."

"Yes. The works. *Not* that you care."

Chad blinked. "That's a hell of a thing to say to me."

"It would have been nice if you had come with us," Trish said, as the voices of the children rose.

He heard Caroline yelling, "Let go of it, Buck! It's my notebook and you already drew all over it! Let go!"

"It's mine!" Buck said, as he had at least a dozen times since Trish called. "Mine! M-i-i-i-ne!"

Trish started, "You said you would go next time and I'm tired of making excuses for...," and went off on the children.

"Goddamn it, Caroline, give it to him! It's a stupid notebook! I can't take this! No, I don't give a shit whose it is! I'll buy you a new one! I can't take it any more! I can't!"

Chad frowned. "Easy, honey."

"Easy? You haven't been with them all day. Because, of course, once again, you said you would come with me to--"

"I've got work, honey. I can't just be taking days off willy-nilly with the big workload and small crew."

"How convenient for you."

"I'm sorry you had a bad day but don't take it out on me." Chad figured she would hang up then, but she didn't.

"My dad asks every time why you didn't come and I don't know what to tell him."

"Is there something wrong with the truth?"

"You said you were going to come the last three times and

you didn't. How do you think that looks?"

Chad realized he was doing seventy and slowed down. "You're the one who decided to go during the week."

"What's the difference? You always get called in for something during the weekends and don't know how to say no."

"Got bills to pay." Chad heard her lighting a cigarette, which prompted him to pop the glove compartment in search of forgotten stashes. "I can't afford to be playing hooky during the week. And work means money. I'm not gonna turn it down. We're just getting by in case you haven't noticed, darlin'. Stuart says I can take a week paid in August. We can make plans then to do something."

"You mean *I* can. Heaven forbid you have to decide anything when it comes to this family."

Knowing nothing good would come from his mouth, Chad kept it shut, and a silence hung on the line.

Ahead he saw the turn-off for Pond Road, which he usually took when heading home. For a moment, he thought that's what he was doing. Then he looked at the clock.

Only five o'clock.

He usually had enough on his list to keep him busy till six or six-thirty. He couldn't remember what else was on his plate until he glanced at his clipboard on the floor. He couldn't see the list, but didn't need to now.

It came back to him. A house on Backwood Road needed to be ready to show it the next day to some out-of-towners. Art and Pengsy were there with a few other guys, touching things up.

"And let's be realistic here," Trish said, giving him a start. He forgot he was still holding the phone to his head. "If you didn't have a reason not to go to my parents', you'd come up with some excuse, like you don't feel good or something. Admit

it. You don't like going there."

It was true, even if Chad never said so. He and his in-laws had about as much in common as a grapefruit and a chainsaw. Conversation usually died within twenty minutes and it was awkward from there on out, especially given Trish's annoying tendency to leave him alone with her folks.

"I hate fighting over the phone," he said. "We'll talk when I get home. For now, I've gotta free the line to call Art."

He did just that, after Trish hung up on him.

After a ring, Art Kroppel picked up: "It's about time, Hammer Man."

Hearing his nickname from the construction days took Chad off-guard. No one had called him that in a while.

Chad sniggered. "Been talking to Pengsy, eh."

"All about your sordid past, that's right." Art chuckled. "Whereabouts are ya?"

"Almost into Barksdale. You guys all finished up with the Backwood place?" Chad figured they weren't, but hoped Art would say they were almost done. Then he would ask Art if he could make do without him so he could go home. "We've had guys there most of the day."

"Still plenty to be done. An hour or two should do it if I have the extra hands. Other'n the house, there's some junk we moved to the garage that we've gotta haul out."

"Junk to haul..."

"Couple dressers. Banged-up futon and tool cabinet. A fridge we swapped out too."

Chad almost remembered something. Then it was gone.

"On my way."

2

The house on Backwood Road had been sitting as the former tenants left it when they skipped town three weeks ago. Preparing it for the next renters kept getting kicked on the back-burner. No one knew it had been left dirty and in iffy condition, except perhaps Stuart Sheldon who had assessed the property on his lonesome and assessed it as only needing light clean-up work. This served as yet another testament to why Stu was better left behind a desk playing with Henry Boggs's money in his pretty hands that never got dirty, instead of making judgment calls he didn't have the experience to make.

It shouldn't take more than a few hours, Stuart had said. If he believed that, he either believed that he had a crew of supermen on payroll or he was just that clueless. Which one? Chad and Art had a pretty good idea.

Art and Pengsy had showed up in the early afternoon, found a mess to deal with, and called in two others to help. They had been clearing the house all day, probably bitching about Stuart all the while and rightly so.

When Chad arrived, the guys were scrambling to clean the place. The garage was filled with junk, and Chad and Pengsy managed to load it all on Art's truck.

Pengsy said nothing and seemed bothered by something.

Chad attempted conversation a few times only to get shrugs, nods, and head-shakes. As they went back into the house, he asked him, "Are you sore at me for something?"

Pengsy looked at him like he was. Then again, he was a hard man to read sometimes. "Should I be?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then you ain't got a thing to worry about." Pengsy

walked off toward the bathroom.

Chad went the other way into the living room.

Big James Skeila, or *Skee* as the guys called him, tackled the kitchen. Woody, who worked with Art often but Chad seldom saw, cleaned out the fireplace, his hair pulled into a frizzy pony-tail as Danny Rothman had often wore it.

Art Kroppel leaned against a doorway. Ruffled gray hair, thick horseshoe mustache, clad in a dusty tee-shirt and jeans, he was taking a smoke break.

Can I bum one of those? danced on the tip of Chad's tongue, but never left it.

"All done," Chad said.

"How much left?" Art asked.

"Nada. We made it fit. All strapped and ready to go. Just take it slow."

"Last run to the dump. Great."

"How many runs earlier today?"

Art gave a chuckle that turned into a cough. "You don't want to know. These folks didn't stick around for the security deposit. The condition they left this place in..." He took another drag. "Hell. They knew it was as good as gone. Stu had no business offering to show this place to anyone. Not so soon. And they're supposed to come tomorrow? I mean, Jesus Christ..."

"It was bad." Pengsy walked in with spray cleaner and paper towels. "Worse than thirty-two Saybrook."

Art shook his head. "I don't know about that. With poor Abby dying in there and all. I'm glad I wasn't there for the cleanup of *that*."

Chad grimaced at the memory of Abby lying on the floor in her robe, critters on her head and scuttling on the carpet around her fallen wig. "He's talking about the stuff we had to remove after. To get it ready to show."

"Oh." Art scratched at his mustache. "I figured when the

kids came, they would have taken the furnishings."

"They took what they wanted. Left the rest. I ended up junking some perfectly good furniture."

"Should have took some of it for yourself," Woody said.

"Naw," Chad said. "My house is cluttered enough. Pengsy swiped a couple things. A foot-rest. Kitchen table and chairs."

"Bedroom mirror," Pengsy added, his voice distant, as he wiped down wood paneling.

Art blew smoke out his nose. "What was the problem at Saybrook anyway?"

Chad yanked off his work gloves. "Problem?"

"You were just there for something, right?"

"Oh." Chad felt like that hole in his head just opened up again. "Right."

Art leaned, raised his brows. "So?"

"Fixed a pipe," Chad said, with no memory of doing it. (Did I fix a pipe?)

"You're kidding," Art said. "I replaced a bunch last year. Did one pop a hole at a weld point?"

"Something like that." Chad didn't know and it bothered him. "Do you want to make that run now? The junk yard closed. I don't know how long that nephew of yours is gonna wait."

"He always putters around after-hours anyway." Art picked up an empty cola can and extinguished his cigarette in it. "But I'm gonna ring him and tell him I'll come first thing tomorrow. After we're done, I thought I'd park the truck and take the bike down to Frick's for a couple fizzy ones. Wanna come? First round's on me."

"Raincheck me. I need to get home tonight."

Art turned. "How about you, Pengsy?"

Chad tensed. He watched Pengsy stop wiping the wall,

crane his head, and had a feeling that deep down Pengsy wanted to say yes as much as Chad wanted to swing by a store for some smokes. He didn't want to answer for Pengsy, but as a silence hung between them, he thought he might have to.

"Frick's." Art raised a brow. "They've got the best..." His words trailed off, as if he remembered what had slipped his mind. "Come to think of it. That's kind of a bad idea."

Pengsy winked, but his face was grim. "Prolly best I don't." He looked back at the paneling that reflected his scowl, and wiped.

"Maybe I shouldn't either," Art said, his voice thin. "I piss away too much money that way." His eyes met Chad's and he flashed a grimace of regret before he clapped his hands. "All right, people. Let's get it done."

It took another twenty minutes to make the house presentable. A few small things still needed to be done, but Woody and Skee agreed to return the next morning to do it. They left the house all at once and Pengsy rode with Chad, who would drop him off home.

"Mind if I smoke?"

"You ask me that every time you get in the jeep." Chad told himself Pengsy wasn't trying to draw attention to it, but it seemed that way sometimes. "It's fine. Roll down the window so the smoke goes out is all." He watched Pengsy light up and take a deep drag that he held in for a long while before venting it out. "What's up with you, buddy?"

"Not a thing." His tone cast great doubt on that.

Chad wondered if Pengsy had a run-in with his ex-wife Jill, who had a special talent for tapping into the foul side of him. "If you ever wanna talk..." He heard him snicker. "I'm here. I know you. I can tell when something's eating you."

Pengsy said nothing.

"You don't wanna talk about it. That's fine. But don't tell me it's nothin'. I know better."

Time passed and they were almost to Pengsy's place when he said: "I've had my cousin on my mind lately."

"Eric?"

Pengsy nodded, staring at the road. "Can't believe he's gone. I should have let it go by now, I guess."

Chad had never known Pengsy to let *anything* go, at least easily. "You were close. Give yourself more time."

Pausing, Pengsy craned his head toward him, jaw shifting to the side, eyes cold. "What if it wasn't an accident?"

"I thought they said it had to do with his bike. The brakes. Or the sun in his eyes when he sped down that hill into the rail." Chad glanced at Pengsy and returned his eyes to the road. "They speculated anyway."

"I ain't so sure now."

"Why?"

"Call it a feeling."

Chad supposed Pengsy wanted a concrete reason for Eric's death that wasn't there. Either that or the paranoid bug was digging into him again.

"See you tomorrow morning," Chad said as he pulled up in front of Pengsy's apartment. "Be bright and bushy-tailed."

"Always," Pengsy said dully.

When he climbed out, Chad noticed someone sitting on the porch. Thin, dark shoulder-length hair, black clothes from head to toe, Jill smoked with a shaking hand.

Oh lord. It is Jill that's up his ass.

Pengsy hesitated with the passenger door open. "How about you come in and I'll put a pot of coffee on."

Chad didn't want to say no, because he suspected Pengsy wanted to talk. Pengsy might have also wanted to put him in the middle of another battle between him and Jill, or have an excuse to shoo her away. He wasn't sure on the latter. Jill hated his guts last time he knew, but she didn't look keyed up

for a fight.

"I can't tonight," Chad said. "Having some trouble on the home front."

Pengsy lowered his head a notch. "Just for a bit?"

Chad opened his mouth to say yes and stopped himself. "Gotta go home and deal with the woman."

3

A half hour later, Chad emerged from his backyard shed. The corners of his mouth sank, jaw slid forward, eyes became wild. The glow from the backyard light scored the lines in his face and gleamed off his freshly sharpened ax.

He lifted it to eye level.

And blew a big gum bubble.

He squashed it between his teeth, pulled it back into the chewing machine, and walked to the wood he set aside for chopping. Growling, he heaved the ax back and buried it in a stubborn piece of lumber. It lodged halfway in. He grabbed his giant sledgehammer from nearby, wound it back, and smashed it down on the back of the ax. The lumber ripped, split down the middle with an upburst of splinters.

Some men used punching bags to vent.

He chopped wood.

The usual things buzzed around in his head. Money. All work. No play. Not enough hours in the day. His wife who ragged on him constantly and long lost interest in doing the horizontal tango. The money-leeching doctors who couldn't decide if Chad's seven year-old son Buck had a shade of autism or ADD. The boys who teased Buck about his erratic behavior and riding "the dummy bus". The same boys that Chad would like to give a very special ride of their own on his steel-toe work boot.

Maybe a few of their ignorant parents too for good

measure. He knew just which ones.

If that wasn't enough, thoughts of Danny Rothman were back in circulation thanks to Danny's would-be fiancée Nina who was eight months preggers and had rung Chad's cell for the umpteenth time that month, wondering if Chad had heard from him. *No one* had. That evening, while driving back from Pengsy's place, he listened to Nina crying.

In the months after Danny's disappearance, Nina had sworn Danny wasn't absent by his own choosing and something terrible had happened, such as death, a likelihood she worked herself up about, talking herself into hysterical rants and then tears. Chad didn't want to give her false hope. On the other hand, he didn't like to see her so upset and doubted it was any good for her pregnancy. Each time Chad brought her down by persuading her that Danny still lived and came up with scenarios to support it.

Gradually, perhaps by his own doing, she was convinced that Danny really did leave town, leave her, and was now somewhere else unaware that he was about to have a child.

He didn't have much hope that Danny was still alive, but sometimes he wondered. He easily imagined Danny in some other town, working as a dishwasher or factory worker, his hair in a pony-tail, mini-cigars in a breast pocket, living with some other woman he maneuvered into taking pity on him with his stock sob stories. When Chad thought of that, just the *chance* it might be true, it angered him. It wasn't out of Danny's character to walk away without a word, not wanting to face her.

"Damn coward." He split another piece of wood.

Some time later while he was stacking along the back porch, Trish came out. Clad in sweatpants and a SUNY Fredonia sweatshirt, her dark hair pinned back in a riot of curls, she looked peeved.

"*Chad.* Your dinner's cold."

He wiped sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his flannel shirt. "Wrap it up. I'll munch later."

"You don't want *anything*?"

"No appetite." He reminded himself that he was *not* outside chopping wood to avoid the talk with Trish that he swore to himself he would have. "A bid-wizer would hit the spot though."

Trish tilted her head. "That's not a meal."

He pulled back a cheek, making a clicking sound between his teeth. "Only meal I'm interested in right now, darlin'."

She turned her back, heading back in. "Get your own."

Pausing, he muttered, "Always do."

A moment later, Caroline barged out onto the back deck and the breeze carried the smell of perfume in almost sickening supply. "*Daaaad.*"

Chad looked up.

Clad in a short skirt and low-cut shirt, Caroline had done her hair in wavy curls and put on make-up that made her look much older. Too much older.

"What?" Chad raised an eyebrow.

"I want to sleep over at Katie's and mom said to ask you."

"Sleep over?" Chad looked her up and down.

"Did I stutter?"

"*Watch it.*"

"Sorry." Caroline forged a smile that would be short-lived. "Can I? We're just going to watch some movies and do our nails and stuff like that."

Judging from her hands on the railing, she was already ahead of the game. Her nails were fire red.

"Mmm-hmm. Is that the usual attire for pajama parties?"

Caroline rolled her eyes. "It's not a *pajama* party."

"And if I ring Katie's parents. What will they say?"

"Why would you..." Caroline gave a disgusted sigh.

"They're not there. Not for a couple nights. Katie asked me to sleepover to--"

"No." Chad positioned another piece of lumber.

"What do you mean *no*? Why *not*!"

"Cuz I said so. And don't take that tone."

"What's the problem? It's the summer. It's not like I've got school or something."

"I don't owe you an explanation, but I'll give you one from a long list. You're grounded. How's that?"

Her voice went up in treble. "F-o-o-r *what*?"

"For giving your mother grief and not helping with Buck."

"That's so not fair," Caroline said, and began the usual rant about how she never got to do anything and Chad was ruining her life and yadda-yadda.

Chad tuned her out, chopped some more wood, and the yadda-yaddas trailed back into the house.

He tensed when he heard Buck wail like a siren in the house, even though the sound was too common to be cause for alarm. Any number of things could set Buck off, some as slight as being unable to readily find a toy or a renegade pea rolling too close to his mashed potatoes, and what might upset him one day might slide the next.

He heard Trish trying to calm him down, seldom easy when he got that jazzed up, but she was better at it than him.

The kid wore her down over time, especially now during the summer when she had him all day, so Chad took the reins at night, which hadn't been easier to handle until recently.

For the longest time, Chad and Trish let Buck sleep in their bed. Having a kid tossing between them was better than one screaming across the hall at three in the morning. Buck wouldn't fall asleep alone. Some nights he wouldn't sleep *period* until the wee hours when his body gave out.

They had gradually worked Buck back into his room,

where Chad fell asleep many nights waiting for Buck to do the same. Buck had a hyperactive imagination that aggravated the monster-in-the-closet complexes to the fifth power, but he was fine when Chad was there. Buck once told him that *the monster* was afraid of him and it was an angle that Chad put to use.

For the past month, save for the off night, Buck went to sleep by himself so long as Chad performed the monster-sweep that had become as routine as locking up the house.

That night was no exception.

Buck pulled his blanket up to his eyes. "See 'em?"

Chad brought a finger to his nose, peeked through the door into the dark closet, and looked back at Buck gravely. "They're there." As a rule, they always were. Whenever he claimed otherwise, Buck argued. "And they're in big trouble now."

Buck gave a nervous little giggle.

Chad backed into the closet with a ferocious grin, pulling the door behind him.

Show time.

"Thought you could hide from me," he said to the darkness. "You were dead wrong. And now I'm gonna *getcha*." Thumping his feet, bumping the walls, rattling toys, Chad caused the usual ruckus. "Go on back to monster-land. Don't ya come back or I'll eat you up." Buck seemed to like it best when he hammed it up. "Fry you up with some french fries and dip ya in some ketchup. That's right. Keep on going."

After he ceased the commotion and stepped out, Buck no longer shielded himself with his blanket.

"Did you get 'em, Daddy?"

"Course I did." Chad cracked a smile. "Daddy always gets the job done and it's my job to beat up the monsters."

(So why do they keep coming back, superman?)

Chad tucked Buck in and went to his own room, where

Trish read a book and smoked in bed even though he asked her not to. He was on month two of his latest quit, but it was doomed. With her puffing around him, his quits always were.

Not wanting an argument, he didn't address it.

"What are you reading?" Chad didn't really care, but it was a means to conversation.

"Nora Roberts."

"Any good?" Chad rummaged through his dresser.

"You say that like you read."

"I don't have the time to get into books."

She eyed him incredulously. "When was the last time you tried to read one?"

"Last week. Arty was lugging around a book and I picked it up to see what it was." It was more like a few months ago, but *last week* sounded better. "Couldn't follow it. People who write those books don't speak to folks like me. Didn't get my attention like a good TV show can."

Trish chuckled without humor. "What was the book?"

"Don't remember."

"I'm not surprised." Trish closed her book over a finger. "Buck asleep?"

"Almost. Not a monster in sight."

"I don't agree with the way you're handling him," she said, and had many times before.

"Don't start with me."

"There's no such thing as monsters. That's what we should be teaching him, not encouraging--"

"I said *don't start*. And you know that route doesn't wash with him. Making a kid believe somethin is a hell of a lot easier than making them un-believe. There ain't any harm in him believin' that I kick their asses."

Trish raised a brow. "There's no harm in showing him that it's okay to solve his problems with violence? You know

how rough he can get with other kids his--"

"Jeeesus Cuh-rrrrrist bananas." Chad slammed a drawer and turned with a fistful of clothes. "I'm doing the best I can and it's the only thing that's worked. If you can come up with somethin that works, I'm all for it. Let me know when you do."

"By the way..." Trish leaned. "There were two messages on the machine from *Nina*."

Chad disliked her tone. "Already talked to her."

"I bet you did."

"She's pregnant and alone with the exception of a few friends who come by now and then. I feel bad about Danny--"

"How often do you go to see her?"

Chad cocked his head to the side. "I suppose the next question you're gonna ask is if there's something about me and Nina you oughta know, right?"

"Is there?"

"No. I thought you might have a bit more compassion for her. She's having a rough time."

"Aren't we all. Did you sleep with her?"

Chad stopped in the doorway, looking over his shoulder. "Why would you suspect that? Is it cuz you think she's prettier'n you? Or do you figure ... I must be getting it from somewhere, cuz I sure ain't gettin' it from my wife who's forgotten that her husband is a man."

Trish eyed him coldly, but he sensed something stirring behind the ice. He might have penetrated with that comment.

"I'm goin' to shower."

Grimacing, he walked down to the hall into the tiny master bathroom and resisted the impulse to slam the door when he closed it. He scowled at the mirror, turned on the shower water, and pulled off his shirt.

That's when he noticed something on the inside of his forearm, words scrawled in black pen. He raised it, squinted at it, tilting his head.

FREEZER OUTSIDE SAYBROOK
REMEMBER

"What the he--"

His voice stopped, mouth hung open, eyes went astray.
The man in the mirror paled.

S I X

THE PRESENCE

1

The morning sun winked behind rafts of moving clouds. In the wavering gloom, Chad stood on the ragged pavement in front of 32 Saybrook and stared at the old freezer like he might a coffin that had risen out of the cemetery sod as a curse to the unwary.

Pengsy stood nearby, but his voice seemed to come from a great distance. "This ain't right. We were here a day ago. We moved this thing." He lit a cigarette in the periphery of Chad's vision. "We *were* here a day ago?"

Pausing, Chad nodded.

"I didn't dream that?"

"Nup."

"Didn't think so."

Keeping his eyes trained on the freezer, Chad asked, "Did you forget about yesterday?"

"If I forgot, I wouldn't be--"

"I mean before now."

Pengsy said nothing.

Chad said nothing too. For what seemed like a long while, they stood there and said a whole lot of nothing.

Afraid he would forget about it again, forget why he was even there, Chad did not glance back to see if the vehicle he heard coming up the driveway was the truck with Art Kroppel and the "FNG" Jason Demas in it.

He just assumed it was.

Earlier that morning, Chad and Art had been talking on their cell phones while they headed to a site to remove a faulty dishwasher. Plans changed when Chad came across his note to himself about the freezer on his to-do list. He had forgotten since earlier that morning when he found the writing on his arm, just as he had forgotten before then that he made the same discovery the night before, and so on, as if his brain could not retain anything about it unless something jogged his memory or he concentrated on it.

There's no AS IF about it, he thought.

Only in its presence--staring at the thing as he was now--could he remember everything, all the times he remembered *after forgetting* and the times over the years someone called him about it. Boggs must have a dozen times, Abby Arnell over twice as much, and then of course Dudley.

More troublingly, Chad remembered the times he took part in its removal. *Yesterday* with Pengsy and Woody. Six or seven months back with Danny Rothman. A couple months before that he and Art removed one that they agreed couldn't be the one that they hauled away the year before. But it was. Thinking back, it was seven times total that he removed it. Always the same one. Every time, he had sensed something off in its angle placement from the previous time.

It moves around, he thought crazily. *When nobody's around, it sprouts legs. The same legs it keeps using to tip-toe out of the scrap yard and climb the hill back to its spot up here. That's all. No biggie.*

Art backed the truck toward the edge of the pavement and climbed out, new straps slung over a shoulder and tools hanging from his belt. His long mustache framed a grimace. A cigarette burned there, trailing smoke.

"Can I ask you something?" Art said beside him, and

Chad nodded. "You gettin' one of those deja vu feelings?"

"We've been here before," Chad said flatly. "Done this before. It don't make sense, but we have. Do you remember?"

Art hesitated. "Glad you do too. I worried something was going wrong with my head."

Chad shook his. "There's something wrong, but it's with that thing." He slid a fresh stick of Big Red in his mouth.

"Let's get it out."

"Again," Art muttered.

Neither moved, even as Jason Demas passed them with the hand-truck. He stopped and looked back at them, his greasy hair kinking out from under his ballcap which he wore sideways like Caroline's boyfriend Nick sometimes did. Chad didn't mind when people did that. Anything that made idiots easier to spot was all right in his book.

"Am I missing something?" Jason asked.

"I don't like that thing," Pengsy said, the majority opinion on the matter.

Chad and Art gawked at it, wary.

"Do you feel that?" Art glanced at Chad.

"That feelin' of being unwelcome."

"I was gonna say a chill in the air. But that works."

Another silence passed.

"Are we gonna stare at it or move it?" Jason went ignored. "Hello?"

"You're gonna make me do it, huh." Art dragged smoke out his nose, squashed his cigarette underfoot, and nodded at Chad's silence. "You are."

"I need to watch." Chad wasn't keen to touch it either. "I don't want to miss a beat this time."

Art approached the freezer, which Jason positioned the dolly behind.

"What are you guys all weirded out about?" said Jason, who had never helped remove it before. "It's just a freaking

freezer."

"Only a freezer," Art said, circling it, eyeing it from all angles. "Right you are."

Pengsy inched toward it, trembling. He had only moved it once, but he looked the most disturbed. No one wondered why. There was no shortage of other things to wonder about.

"Right you are," Art repeated thinly, his face tightening into a grimace.

Then he did the unexpected.

When he yanked the handle, Chad's heart stopped in his chest. Irrational terror crashed over him and a voice inside screamed, *DON'T OPEN IT!*, but it happened too fast in real time for the words to find his mouth. It was one of those moments that seemed to stretch, as if time slowed down to give him a chance to stop whatever was in motion--catch a dropped light bulb before it crashed on a concrete floor, catch himself on a gutter before he fell off a roof, dodge a flying object, stop Art before he opened *that freezer*--and at the same time mocked him by leaving him paralyzed.

The handle busted off with a spill of rust flecks at Art's feet and the door groaned ajar.

Chad recoiled when Art flung it open, like the door of a tavern where he meant to brawl.

Light found the rotten cavity inside, which was crusty with corrosion, blackened by grime and mold, crumbling and riddled with rot-holes--the bite marks of the elements that conspired with time to eat it up.

Creaking, the hinges gave.

The door ripped off, crashed to the ground.

Chad remembered when that happened once before, and the time when the whole thing busted into a rusty crumple as they loaded it onto the truck. This troubled him all the more. Something that rotted could only fall apart once. Art gave him

an apologetic look.

Chad inclined his head. "Hurry it up."

While Art and Jason eased the wreck onto the dolly and secured it with straps identical to those Art had lost when he and Chad hauled it off eight or nine months ago, Chad had two nagging feelings. The first was that they would be back again, the second that he was being *watched*.

Not from ahead, but behind.

He wouldn't turn to confirm it yet, refusing to look away from the freezer until all of it was on the truck.

Only then did he crane his head and scan. His gaze darted to Betty Morgan in the next yard, and slid to the cape house where William Dudley watched from a window.

Chad didn't like him much, mostly because Dudley looked at him like he might a sausage of dogshit in his flower garden, and as for Betty...

Something about that lady always gave him the creeps.

He didn't know just what.

2

William Dudley watched them load the freezer on the back of the pickup truck, expecting it to topple and crash off the dolly considering he saw nothing securing it there and how rough they handled it. Regardless, the old piece of junk clung to the dolly as if plastered there and went on without a hitch.

One hand up and holding the curtain open, his uneasy expression reflected on the inside of the window glass, William sipped from his coffee cup.

Two of the men climbed into the truck. The other two--one of them Chad--stood talking to the driver.

William returned his gaze to the freezer.

Good riddance, he thought, yet felt strangely dissatisfied.

He couldn't shake a voice inside that told him there was

something wrong with what his eyes saw.

Nearby, Kirsten sat indian-style with two dollies on her lap, one on the floor, and another in a little rocking chair beside her teddy bear, who leaned against the corner of the entertainment center at a dozy angle.

Dora The Explorer was on, and as always Kirsten watched it in a near trance until a break came.

Her attention returned to the dollies on her lap, who were doctors tending to the one lying on the carpet.

A moment of black poked between commercials and the passing shapes reflected off the screen--stretched-out stick figures with spiky hands--went unnoticed.

"You can play too, General," she told the boy only she could see. Listening to his response, she cocked her head. "Why not?" Her voice lowered to a whisper. "Why not?"

What General said next made her giggle.

"He is not, silly." Without unfolding her legs, she pitched and reached for the teddy bear. With a little groan, she reached him. "He's nice."

She pet him and snuggled him, looking at General. "See. He's nice."

"Okay, honey," muttered her daddy, who stood in the window with his back turned and wasn't really listening.

Smiling, she hugged the bear once more and set him on the lap of the dolly in the rocking chair. She nudged it so it rocked.

Back and forth on the carpet.

It settled.

Dora came back on, entrancing Kirsten anew.

She didn't notice the chair rocked again.

And then again.

The dolly in the chair closed her eyes. The bear on her lap slowly turned his head. Fuzzy fabric crept down and

covered the top of Mister Ben's glass eyes. The irises shifted, the reflected image of William looking out his window twisting around them in crescents.

Another shape--one that William wouldn't have seen had he turned around--encroached.

Stiff with five long digits, it curled like branches of a terrible tree.

3

Hand shapes crept out of the growing shadow of a woman, which consumed them as she entered the neighboring house.

Face lit up with a smile of dull bliss, silver hair bouncing and eyes twinkling as she whistled along to the *Neil Diamond* song on the radio, carrying a plastic bowl that had been filled with the stale croutons she just gave to the birds, Betty Morgan walked through the gloom of her home into her kitchen where her heels knocked the linoleum.

She added the bowl to the dishes in her soap water. Her eyes lifted to the window over the sink that overlooked her yard and the cul-de-sac where two vehicles entered view.

A jeep.

A pickup truck with an empty bed.

Betty pursed her lips, wondering, as she watched.

Through a window in the next room, thirteen others watched the same thing from a painting on the dining room wall that hung between a list of The Ten Commandments and a detailed crucifix. The watchers were seated in a painting that sometimes *changed*, a stock print of a famous work by *Da Vinci*, whose vision of *The Last Supper* bore little resemblance to what had come to life within that dusty frame.

Spiders and webs dotted with struggling flies riddled the painted border around the scene. Inside, cobwebs dangled in dirty tufts from the ceiling. Phantom shapes stirred in the

shadows, which grew and retreated, wavering as dark clouds swept over the landscape beyond the windows and pedimented doorway in the background.

Chunks of moldy bread, clumps of vegetable mush, and chicken bones ranged across the long table that was acrawl with bugs.

But the plates were empty.

Their faces elongated and inhuman, the colors of their garments fading into grays, their cups full of blood and gnarled feet on a floor overrun with cockroaches, those seated at the table looked pleased.

Bartholomew leaned on the left end of the table with his head turned at an impossible angle, eyes peering back over a shoulder. James the Less grinned between him and Andrew, whose mouth of jagged teeth gaped over his beard. His hands were lifted with fingers that wiggled in anticipation. Peter pitched back from where he had been leaning between John and Judas, who held not a bag of money but an airplane bottle of whiskey.

The central figure raised his hands that had been palms down on the table and fisted them.

A hand slapped his back from the apostle to the right, James the Greater, whose arms were out heartily. His jaw bobbed with unheard laughter. Behind a shoulder, Thomas sniffed the blood on an up-raised finger. Leaning into his other, Philip shifted restlessly in a hunched position, eyes yawning in opposing directions and mouth stretched into a mad Cheshire cat grin.

To the far right sat Matthew, Thaddaeus, and Simon. They leered mischievously as their black-nailed hands gestured and mouths moved with unknown chatter.

Jesus and the apostles exchanged glances and smiles.

Judas was the only one not smiling, until he knocked over

the salt with the heel of his whiskey bottle.

4

"Pengsy?" Chad said a second time while he drove.

He looked in the side mirrors where he saw the houses at the foot of Saybrook Road passing and looked into the rear-view where he saw Art and Jason in the truck behind him, wondering why Pengsy stared at the passenger side mirror as if looking at his own grave. "What are you lookin' at? *Pengsy*."

Pengsy twitched and turned. Sweat rolled down his pale face and his brows were high and together, bringing out the lines in his forehead. "What?" he said, his voice thin and incoherent.

"I asked what you're eyeballin' that has you looking like a mouse in the jaws of a snake."

"Me? Nothing." Pengsy shook his head and dropped his brows, which jumped back up as if spring-loaded. "I think I caught a bug." He turned his face in profile, eyes jerking about. "Don't feel good."

"It's that freezer."

"Freezer?" Pengsy glanced blankly.

Good Christ, has he forgotten already? Chad thought, and wondered absurdly if Art remembered where he was going or merely followed him. *Am I forgetting?*

"It's really got you rattled," Chad said. "We removed that freezer yesterday and now we're doing it again."

Pengsy blinked, as if in recognition. "It ain't that."

"I hauled the freezer many times." Chad deliberately said the word *freezer* as much as he could. "You think you're uneasy about that freezer? Lemme tell ya what I'm feeling. I am so--"

"I said it ain't that," Pengsy said with an edge.

"Well, something has you spooked and you aren't hidin' it

well. It couldn't be more obvious. So lay it on me, because you're freaking me out more'n I already am."

"What I fuckin' say?" Pengsy's eyes blazed. "I said I ain't feelin good! You want me to write it in blood and have the goddamn thing notarized? Get off my shit or it'll be your fucking blood I write it in! *That what you want?"*

Chad hadn't seen this side of Pengsy in a while. "All right. Take it down a notch. I don't want none of that."

"I guarantee it."

"Enough." Chad flashed a glare at him. "I thought there was something you weren't tellin' me and I was trying to drag it out. I wasn't out to knock horns or nothin'."

"Coulda fooled me."

"Don't be an asshole."

"That's like asking me not to breathe." Pengsy let out a snigger, but it sounded weak.

"You said it." Chad blinked, eyes darting around.

His memory hitched. He knew where he was, but not why he was there or where he was going. It returned to him swiftly, but sat precariously in his mind, as if it could tip back over into the darkness again at a moment's notice.

Oh no you don't.

He pulled to the shoulder of the road.

"Why did you stop?" Pengsy asked.

Chad stuck an arm out the window, motioned for Art to pass, and once he did, Chad pulled the jeep back onto the road behind the truck where he could keep an eye on the freezer.

You call it that, but what is it really? asked a voice inside. *What about that? What the hell is it?*

He didn't want it out of sight any more than he wanted it out of mind, which for that old rot-box seemed to amount to the same thing.

Art turned at the next intersection and Chad followed.

They drove toward the sun as it poked from the clouds.

"You missed your ride," a voice whispered.

"What?" Chad darted a glance.

Pengsy had his head turned toward the passing trees and the fence to the scrap yard. "Nothing." His tone was dull, listless. "I didn't say anything."

"Mmm-kay."

Squinting, Chad lowered his visor, unaware that the papers he had tucked up there had fallen on his lap. His attention was on the road and what stood on the truck bed, the door off and the straps that held it to the dolly vibrating over the exposed cavity that the sunlight passed but did not enter. It looked as black as a coal mine grave until the road took a bend.

Some of the shadows retreated, leaving in their wake a cluster of shapes that nagged his eyes and an orange glint that winked and made him wonder.

He recalled nothing reflective inside the thing.

The way it pulsed made him think of a lit cigarette.

Then again, a lot of things did that since he quit.

Chad saw the entrance to the scrap yard ahead, and saw Art wasn't slowing down. "You didn't forget."

They passed the entrance.

"You did."

"I did what?" Pengsy muttered.

"Wudn't talking to you." Chad grabbed his cell and rang a number.

"This is Art," Art answered.

"I know it's you, you lunkhead. I'm right behind ya. You passed the gates."

Silence on the line.

"Do you remember where we're... going." His voice lost strength on that last word as he spotted smoke curling up from that orange glint

(cigarette glow)

in...

"The freezer." Chad peered into it, tilting his head.

"We're taking it to the junkyard."

"You don't gotta tell me that," Art said, but an uncertainty lingered in his voice that confirmed Chad's suspicions. "It's on *my* truck."

"Well then, find a place to..."

"Ride with me," croaked a voice. *"Ride to the rails. All the way."*

(The lovebirds ride.)

Chad narrowed his eyes.

The shapes in the freezer that had been indistinct formed a gory face. The broken body it belonged to came into focus where it was sprawled on a driver seat. Legs mangled, clothes torn and punctured and stained with blood, guts in his lap, Chris Purvis looked as he might have twenty years ago after a train smashed into his Ford and ended the young lives of the six inside. Half of his face gone, exposing the skull, head lolled flush against a shoulder, he stared. Blood-matted hair hung down over an arm that dangled from the joint on threads of flesh. The good arm rose. The corpse dragged from his cigarette and the smoke vented out his busted neck where jags of bone jutted from the flesh.

"C'mon, Hammer Man. Let's ride."

Chad tensed. His lip curled up over his teeth.

Then Chris Purvis was gone.

Chad twitched at Art's voice in his ear: "I'd be happy to turn around, but I can't pull a U-ey with you tryin to bum-rush me with the jeep."

Unaware till now that he tailgated, Chad hit the brake.

The jeep jerked, tires chirped, and Pengsy braced a hand.

"Get your license from a Cracker Jack box or what?"

"Sorry." Chad blinked, blinked again, and saw nothing in the shadows of the freezer. "My mind went loopy there. I could have sworn..." He glanced at Pengsy. "Never mind. It's crazy."

"Maybe it's you that's crazy."

All things considered, Chad wondered about that too.

5

Art's nephew Fred had buck teeth and beady eyes that confusion visited often. He wasn't a dumb kid, but on some days it was hard to tell. Jaw askew, bony arms hanging from the sleeves of a dirty gray tee-shirt he swam in, Fred looked blank as Art hollered to move the tow truck that blocked the dirt road that led between stacked automobile pancakes into the heart of the Lemstrom scrap yard. Fred hadn't been there the day before when Chad and Pengsy had come with the freezer, but the new owner Reggie Kubeske had.

Reggie shuffled out of the office, shifting his short but wide frame from side to side and slow as hell like always. Clad in overalls and a red shirt with a print that the years had frayed beyond recognition, he had a hand hooked on his belly and a grimace.

"He looks constipated," Pengsy said. "Did you see that cheesecake he was gobbling up yesterday?"

"Prolly ate the whole thing too. It's his weakness."

"No wonder."

Chad shook his head. "That was yesterday. That iron stomach recovered by now. I'd bet you a fiver he's been hittin' the chili again."

"You'd lose."

"Prove it."

"You're on."

Reggie glanced at the jeep with a nod. His gray hair

kinked out from under his ballcap, jutting sideburns flanked his sun-burned face that was a forest of salt-and-pepper bristles, and eyes rolled up at Fred as he leaned on the hood of the rat-trap of a Nova he had been driving since disco was in fashion.

"Fred. Fred! *Hey!*" Reggie had a scratchy, whipping voice. "Gardammit boy. I'm taking to ya!"

Fred looked back and forth between Art and Reggie.

"You got taters in your ears!" Reggie flagged an arm. "These boys is tryin' to get through! Move the doggone truck! How many times I gotta tell ya not to park it any damn place!"

As Fred did a lot of muttering and shrugging, Reggie's eyes grew so wide they seemed to bug out of his skull. He snapped a pointed hand toward the office.

"Then *scoot* your bony *butt* in there and get the dang keys!" Reggie clenched his jaw as Fred shambled toward him reluctantly, mouth moving with words Chad couldn't hear. "Don't you gimme none of that! You ain't no cripple!" He yelled at Fred's back as he passed. "When I bust them legs with a pipe you'll be a cripple if you don't get 'em movin'!"

On any other day, Chad might have given a chuckle at this. He didn't have one in him after having a twenty year old corpse yap at him, hallucination or not. His eyes kept visiting the freezer, but he never kept them there for long, afraid something else might take shape inside that he wouldn't care for.

Meanwhile, Reggie ambled alongside the truck, had a few words with Art, and continued on toward the jeep. "And you better have a talkin' to that brain-dead nephew of yours!" Reggie paused at the sight of the freezer, which he looked up and down with distaste. "He's gonna make me pop a ventricle."

"Hey, Reg," Chad said when he came to his window.

"Freddy's having one of those days I see."

Reggie made a face as if he tasted something bad and his eyes swept the office that Fred had yet to emerge from.

"Sometimes I think Arty's brother used that boy's head for batting practice when he was a child."

Pengsy snickered.

"The mood I'm in, I might bring out the weedwacker. He don't like it much when I chase him with it."

"Can't imagine why," Chad said.

"Cuz it gets him movin'." Reggie gave a rusty laugh, and then thumbed at the freezer. "So where'd you find that ugly lady? Another junk yard?"

Chad sighed. "Same place as yesterday when we came."

Reggie fidgeted with his cap. "*I* was here yesterday, but not you fellas."

Pengsy looked at Chad, raising a brow.

Chad frowned at Reggie. "You don't remember?"

He took off his hat and scratched at his hair, thinking. His head shook slowly. "Guess not."

"I wish I could say I was surprised." Chad gestured ahead. "We picked it up from the old Winslow place."

"Oh." Reggie nodded gravely. "Hoad place you mean."

"Just like the ones we brought down before." Chad thought it best not to mention that he thought it was the same one as previous times. "Remember that, Reggie?"

"Sure, but I'm surprised you're still finding things on that plot," Reggie said, his eyes following Fred as he walked to the tow truck. "Why I remember when Boggs bought the land and him and Tom Beamish made runs down here with all kinds of junk."

"Tom Beamish," Chad repeated absently.

"He ran the Boggs crew then, back when I just started working for Joe Lemstrom." Reggie tucked a tongue in his cheek and shook his head. "Ain't been the same since Joe

passed on. Hard to believe he's gone and I've inherited this dang empire of scrap."

"You can't tell me you don't love it some."

"Some." Reggie cracked a smile. "It's love-hate-love." His smile frayed and he groaned. "Mmm-boy. You know where to go. I need to go find me summa my Maalox."

"Heartburn?"

"Naw." Reggie inflated his cheeks and exhaled as he shook his head. "Them gardamn kidney beans." He bobbed his brows and lumbered away. "The gas. Sweet Mary."

Chad turned his head toward Pengsy, pausing. "Chili."

Pengsy looked away. "I'll buy your next pack of smokes."

"There won't be one." Chad shifted to DRIVE as Fred moved the truck and Art advanced. "I'm quit for keeps."

"You say that now."

"You quit drinkin' for all time." Chad hit the gas, following Art, and looked at Pengsy. "Didn't you?"

"I said yes."

Chad hadn't heard it.

Pengsy clenched his jaw. "I only know how to drink two ways. Never or always."

"Well, all right then."

"*You* haven't quit drinkin' though. Have you?"

"It never took me over like it did you, buddy," Chad said. "Every man is wired different."

"How nice for you."

Chad noted his tone and worried about what it meant, but changed the subject. "So what are your thoughts on that freezer? My mind is boggled."

"Dunno." Pengsy dug out his cigarettes. "I want to look at it side by side with the other."

"It won't be there."

"Why wouldn't it? We just left it yesterday."

They pulled up near a cluster of old stoves and a jumbled pile of pipes and bathroom fixtures. Between them was a gap where they had left the freezer a day ago.

His jaw slack, Pengsy stared.

Chad shifted to PARK. "It's never there."

SEVEN

BETTY

1

Betty Morgan thought about the *Tommyknockers* again as she dispersed beef chunks and beans in a corner of her backyard. A possum she had named Nicky came each night to dine there, which was one of the constants that she could rely on.

Her mother had also left scraps for the animals when Betty was a child. She had often claimed it wasn't for the animals at all, but for little creatures who brought bad luck if they weren't kept happy: the Buccas. Or the Tommyknockers, which later became an interchangeable term in her family. Sometimes, so many years later, a lifetime later, Betty told herself that she left food out for the same reason. Most of the time, however, she thought of the animals who needed her to fill the achy place in their bellies that hungered.

Oh, how they hungered.

Her father often yarned about the mines at the dinner table, which was not quite big enough for everyone, especially after Grandpa came to live with them. Mama never seemed to eat, always on her feet while Betty and three rambunctious brothers ate elbow to elbow. What Betty remembered the most about dinner in her childhood home in Pennsylvania was listening to the stories about how the Tommyknockers helped miners find the richest veins and even warned of danger by knocking on pipes or creaking timbers.

Papa claimed they had saved his life once by using their

pickaxes to loosen stones, which fell and rapped his hard hat. Some believers might have wrote it off as a prank or a show of ill will, which the Tommyknockers were also known for against those who did not treat them with respect. Charles Cottle had taken it as a warning, because he had been good to them and always left some of his lunch for them to munch on, as was customary to ensure good fortune and their continued services.

"Like the Bucca!" Thomas, the oldest, had said.

"Bucca and Tommyknocker come from the same stock," Papa had said, and went on with the story.

Only minutes after Charles left the mine, it caved in and became a tomb for six men who had not believed in Tommyknockers, much less left them offerings.

Betty's brother John once asked: "Is that why the miners died, Papa?"

Charles had said that it was, in a roundabout way. They had no warning from the Tommyknockers, because they didn't have their respect. He said he didn't think they had caused that cave-in, but it wasn't unheard of, in acts of retribution. Some Tommyknockers got angry against those who left them nothing.

As the stories became darker and Charles told of malicious pranks that left men dead or lame, Betty's notion of cute and jolly helper elves began to turn upside down. They were not such good elves after all, and Betty--the youngest of the Cottle kids--became scared of them.

Her brothers didn't, not until Grandpa Cottle had his say on the subject. Grandpa had already given the children nightmares with stories of Black Peter, the dark cannibal twin of Santa Claus who was more interested in the naughty than the nice. On a coal cart pulled by zombie rams, Black Peter emerged each year from his mines to leave coal as warnings and to gather the bad kids who did not heed his warning the year before, stuffing them into a bag of rats to be brought back

to the mines where they would live as slaves and eventually die on his dinner plate.

This dark fairy tale had surely been aimed at Betty's mischievous brothers and it had served its purpose, as their behavior always improved when the calendar in the kitchen opened to December. It proved more effective than the fires of Hell Papa told of, where bad people burned forever but only after death--an event that seems so far away in the mind of a child that it's inconceivable.

The devil was too far and the threat of Black Peter came just once a year.

Grandpa found an angle, not to mention brought Hell a little closer, when he revealed that some Tommyknockers were the damned souls of the Jews who crucified Jesus Christ and were doomed to work in mines in eternal penance, a punishment only the kids snatched away by Black Peter might appreciate. He had made the Tommyknockers *demons*. In a household where the bible was so prominent, demons were real things indeed. As if that wasn't scary enough, Grandpa told them that the children of miners were watched by Tommyknockers good and bad, and they took up residence in the walls of homes as readily as in mines and crevices in the black earth. They watched. They *reported*.

"If you don't mind your manners all the year through," Grandpa had said, "you might become a Tommyknocker too."

The old man bridged all the spooks into one bogeyman, a force to be reckoned with, the dreaded Bucca-boo, a Black Peter of all seasons who took bad children away, a devil that damned:

The Tommyknocker Man.

Words alone did not have staying power with her brothers. Few things did when it came to John, William, and Thomas. Close together in age. Partners in crime. An

alliance.

One evening, after dinner was done and the boys were storming through the house and up to their old destructive antics, Grandpa had called them into the living room, where unbeknownst to any of them Betty was watching. Body scrunched on the stairs, she peered down at them through the railing posts.

"The knockers have come two nights now," Grandpa had said. "And I'm scared for you. Three knocks. Three nights." The old man shook his head gravely. "I'm scared, and you should be too."

Thomas had looked away, rolling his eyes.

"Late last night and the night before," Grandpa said, one side of his face in shadow, the other bathed in the wavering glow from the fireplace. *"Tommyknockers, tommyknockers, knockin' on the door."* His eyes grew hauntingly wide with every word and the boys trembled when he flung up a pointed hand. *"You better be good. Be good as good as you can. Or you'll get taken by the Tommyknocker Man."*

As uncertain as the boys looked, it probably would have worn off in days.

If the Tommyknocker Man hadn't come to visit.

A stocky, faceless shape in the moonlight with a large rock hammer dangling by his side, *he* stood in the yard where Betty was the first to see him through the window.

None of the Cottle kids soon forgot the look of terror and the violent tremble that came to Grandpa when he looked outside. "Oh Lord help you boys. I warned ya." His voice frayed and he seemed to verge on tears. "And now he's here. *He's here. Oh why couldn't you boys be good. Why.*"

Only Thomas had the nerve to look, and it was his turn to tremble. Once he started crying, he set off the others like fireworks on a shared fuse. The ruckus of them crying drowned out the sound of little Betty crying on the stairs

where she clutched the railing posts.

When the visitor swept past the window and three loud raps came to the door, the boys went from crying to screaming. They nearly knocked Betty down the stairs when they tore up them to their rooms.

The days of misbehavior ended after that, except for short-lived lapses that were corrected as easily as three mysterious knocks on the door late at night.

Only years later had Betty's brothers decided that the Tommyknocker Man had really been Papa or perhaps Uncle Stephen playing the role, but Betty had never been sure.

The thing she saw in the moonlight was stamped forever in her memory. Stiff, inhuman, it visited her in nightmares throughout her life, always standing outside the scene of the dream, gripping its rock hammer, staring, waiting.

Waiting to *knock*.

And do lord-knew-what-else.

Some nights as she lay waiting for sleep and she heard noises poke through the silence, innocent sounds such as the house settling, she imagined *them* behind the walls of her room, chewing on the offerings they had scavenged from her yard while they tunneled with their little pickaxes.

Tommyknockers. Tommyknockers.

Knocking on the walls?

Betty did not ask herself why--the last few months more than over--she kept thinking about *them*, those strange elves that her father and generations of Cottle miners that came before swore were real, passing the belief from father to son like religion.

She simply let the thoughts buzz around in her head as she would harmless flies that found their way into the house.

As she always did.

While her body ran through the same motions every day,

the things inside were in an endless freefall through random pockets of reality and her mind zoomed through her inner landscape like a lost driver with a lead foot.

When it circled one block in particular, it often meant her subconscious was working out a problem.

But she had no sense of this.

Nor was she conscious that she puttered around with the same rituals day by day because they were the only semblance of order she knew now. They were bolts of her foundation, which had been rocking as far back as when her life as a young mother ended with a baby dead in the crib but most precariously since her husband left the house and never returned.

They had fought recently about the second child they long tried for but Betty could not give him, but had been on good terms that day. As far as Betty knew. It was an average day, spent in an average way, with Betty readying her gardens for winter while Roy raked leaves and smoked cigarettes. Clouds rolled in with a light rain drizzle and Betty went back into the house, where there was never a shortage of things to do. Roy came in long enough to give a peck on the cheek, wrestle his brawny arms into his coat, and grab the car keys so he could drive to work downtown at The Sunshine Bar and Grille.

The car never left, but Roy did.

And he didn't come back.

It had been more than forty years since that autumn afternoon in 1968. Sometimes it seemed so very far away.

Other times, Betty swore...

It was only yesterday.

2

Night fell and Betty heard a telephone ringing.

At first she thought it came from the TV. She was watching an episode of *Days of our Lives* many decades old on the soap opera channel, ogling a young and handsome MacDonald Carey in his role as Dr. Tom Horton like a teenager with a crush, and wondering why neither Tom or his wife Alice acknowledged the phone ringing in the background.

Then it occurred to her.

The sound wasn't coming from the home of the Hortons.

It came from hers.

From the kitchen.

Confusion swept through her eyes. They blinked rapidly, then stopped. She snapped her head to the side, a silver tress of hair hooking to a corner of her mouth.

Nearly a minute passed while the telephone rang and one eyelid twitched unconsciously before her blank expression gave way to a smile.

Betty knew *who* was calling. She always knew *his* ring, as if a magic in that sound reached inside her and awakened something deep down. *Down* where old dusty cocoons could yield new butterflies that were as fresh and beautiful as can be. *Down* where only voices from her heart were heard.

Setting her tea on an end-table beside a silent cordless phone, Betty rose off her cushioned chair and walked through the dining room, unaware that the figures in the painting of *The Last Supper* were craning their heads, watching her walk into the kitchen.

Her heels knocked.

Giddy with anticipation and fidgeting with her dress, Betty breezed past her stove that shined from a recent

cleaning and her refrigerator where notes old and new were anchored by smiley face magnets, a constellation of happy yellow stars hanging in her confused universe.

The rotary phone on the wall rang and she felt its vibration from her head to the tips of her toes. It traveled through her like a cold but invigorating charge.

When she stopped, the pleats of her dress swayed from her stiff legs and the strange airy echo from the last knock of her heels on the linoleum floor went unnoticed.

The phone kept ringing.

She took a shaky breath and seized the receiver.

"Roy?"

The dial tone in her ear didn't fully register in her mind. It was there, but had no meaning.

Her irises swung from side to side in even strokes, the way the eyes of creepy cat clocks do. "Hello?"

No response.

"I know you're there, Roy."

The tone frayed with white noise and a voice struggled through it. *"--etty. Betty! You there, darlin'?"*

"Roy?"

"You there?"

"Yes, sweetie. There is a lot of noise. I can barely hear..."

The line cleared. Voices chattered, silverware jangled, and pans clanged in the background.

"Damn telephone service," Roy said with his country drawl. "It's the devil."

She planted a hand on her hip. "When are you coming home?"

"Who can say."

"You can, that's who. Roy, just what do you think--"

"Mind me now, woman. It's suppah time and we're awful hungry down here. I shut down the grills for cleanin'. The boys love your cookin' besides. Only yours, honey."

This made Betty smile. "I am a good cook."

"Oh, you betcha girdle you are."

"Roy!" Blushing, she threw a hand over her mouth and darted her eyes around, as if someone else in her empty house might have overheard.

"You know it," Roy said. "So come on down. The boys is waitin' and so am I to see that pretty face. It just lights me up inside, honey."

"Well..." Betty cocked her head to the side and her smile widened. "I suppose I could." The smile then frayed a touch. "Will you be home later?"

She heard him strike a match.

Roy always carried a box of wooden ones to light his Pall Malls. "Not tonight. Still got lots of work to do. We're backed up here and we've gotta right this place out 'fore the inspector comes by. That could be at any time. Maybe I'll come home tomorruh? How's that?"

"Tomorrow?" Betty filled with hope. "Really?"

Roy sighed, or perhaps he exhaled a drag of smoke.

"That's right. Tomorrow's good. It's always good."

"I love you, tomorrow," Betty said, her voice melodic but not quite singing. "You're always a day away."

She giggled.

Roy joined her.

For only a moment.

"Always," Roy said dully. "A day away. That it *is*."

"I'll put together the leftovers and be right over." Betty couldn't wait to see him. "Oh Roy. I love you so."

"Mmm-hmm," he said, which was just as good as a *I love you too* coming from Roy Morgan. "I'll meet you at the door like always."

Betty opened her mouth to say something, but Roy hung up.

A busy signal pulsed in her ear.

Not long after, she put on her coat and cleared the fridge of the tupperware containers that held leftovers.

Meat loaf. Mashed potatoes. Corn on the cob. Gravy.

After gathering them into a doubled-up paper bag, Betty carried them out her front door and down her driveway.

E I G H T

THE TUG OF OTHER STRINGS

1

This flower now blooms in the garden of Heaven...

...read an epitaph on a tombstone not far from Deborah Dudley's in Homeland Cemetery. Hers had no epitaph, only the dates that framed her time alive and her full name, DEBORAH MAY RENDELL DUDLEY, which spanned over the bouquet of roses William had brought last week and leaned against her stone.

They were *dead* now too.

Usually when he came to visit Deborah, he told her what was happening in his and Kirsten's life, kept her informed of Kirsten's developments such as when she learned to ride the big girl bike and when she said the whole alphabet without a hitch.

This time, he was silent.

He usually thought of the good times they had together.

That day his mind couldn't push through the images that had lodged behind his eyes. The nightmare that troubled his sleep the night before had been fuzzy until he came to Deborah's grave and looked at the statue nearby.

Flanked by bushes, the stone detail eroded and overtaken by moss and mold, the statue depicted a baby sitting on the lap of a mother figure, possibly the Virgin Mary. She held the babe with her left arm and the other arm was bent and

reaching, as if to touch the baby's face. That arm ended in a stump at the wrist as a result of age or perhaps vandalism.

Her face without emotion and head down-turned to the child whose face she could no longer touch, she looked with solid eyes that looked as cold as the tombstones over the silent dead.

In the nightmare, the statue had living eyes that watched and the dead were not silent. They stirred in the earth and moaned, when William began to *dig*.

Pitching soil over his back in a flurry, William had been trying to dig her out. The top of the hole up to his waist, then his shoulders, and then over his head, William dug and dug, but still did not reach her coffin.

"William, stop," said the mother statue in Deborah's voice. "Don't do it. Live. Please live."

The dead moaned in chorus.

"...the dead join the dead, only the dead join..."

"You will not find me," the statue said, and cried blood.

"You will not find me! Stop!"

He dug until the hole was so deep that he could barely reach the top. Questioning if the coffin was even there or if he had the right grave at all, he jumped and tried to grab the edge to pull himself out, but he pulled the earth down instead. It didn't stop. The hole constricted and filled. The earth swallowed him in darkness.

The terror of that terrible end, even if only in dream, stole over him again and he trembled.

The sobs began soon after. His hand flew over his mouth as if to keep them in, but they jerked between his fingers as he staggered away toward his car. He wasn't supposed to go to Mary and Joe's to pick up Kirsten for another couple hours, but he knew that's just where he was going and without delay.

Kirsten was his life line, all the good left worth holding onto in his world.

Being with her would make the feelings of loneliness and hopelessness go away.

It was the only thing that did.

2

Kirsten did not like the new house up on the hill, the little house that Daddy said was "home" and felt like anything but. She didn't like the high grass over by where Daddy parked the car and she didn't like the woods either, especially when the sun went down and left it in a darkness that made her afraid when she dared to look into it. Though she could not have verbalized the reaction inside her with any justice if she tried, it *felt* like something in the darkness was looking back, the way she swore people in pictures *looked* at her once in a while. From the corner of her eyes, she had seen pictures *change* and flashes of movement in mirrors where there was nothing moving to reflect.

Just as her special friend *General* had warned, "home" was not a good place at all.

And this was one more reason to add to the list of why she *loved* going to Grandma and Grandpa's house.

There she could have ice cream and cookies whenever she asked for them, could watch cartoons on the big TV, and could play with Raleigh, a shaggy doggie who liked to play tug-of-war and would do tricks for a treat. Grandpa took her to the playground a couple times, and once to the lake where they collected pretty stones and shells on the beach. Kirsten's favorite thing to do with Grandpa was feeding the ducks in the pond next door that belonged to Mrs. Piety, a lady who looked a million years old and smelled funny (not that Kirsten had told her so, at least not yet).

Grandpa hadn't been there when her daddy dropped her

off that day. This almost bothered her much as when she realized she had left Mister Ben in the car. Almost. Only the excitement of going to see Grandpa Joe could make good old fuzzy Mister Ben slip her mind.

Her love for Grandpa trumped all.

But Grandma Mary was okay too.

Kirsten spent the first hours with Grandma, who showed her pictures of Mommy when she was little and kept talking about how much Kirsten looked like her. This wasn't a sad thing. Kirsten enjoyed looking at the pictures in Grandma's books or the ones on Grandma's walls.

They were not strange like those at home that made the skin on her arms cold and tingly in a way she didn't like.

But they did make her miss Mommy.

When she told Grandma so, Grandma agreed and there were lots of hugs before Kirsten said she wanted to color some pictures. Grandma set up a doodle-pad and crayons on the kitchen table for her and made her a strawberry milkshake.

Kirsten was still working on it when Grandpa came whistling through the door with a grocery bag.

A grin covered his face. "*Heeeey, pumpkin!*"

"Grandpa!" She ran into his arms.

He groaned when he picked her up.

Grandma breezed past and tapped Grandpa on the shoulder. "Don't forget what the doctor said about your back."

"Doctor shmactor." Grandpa gave Kirsten a loud smooch on the cheek and carried her back to the table. "Drinking some strawberry milk?"

"Milkshake," Kirsten said it more like *miwkshake*.

"It looks yummy." He set her down. "Was that filled up all the way to the top? Did you drink all that yourself?"

"Uh-huh."

"All in your tummy? How are you gonna fit the rest down there?" Grandpa gave a hearty laugh.

Kirsten shrugged and smiled.

Grandpa gave a mock frown. "And you're not going to leave any for your old grandpa?"

She held the glass toward him. "You can have some too."

"No, he can *not*." Grandma opened the fridge and put things away. "Don't you dare. You know what that lactose does to you."

Kirsten blinked. "What's lucktoes?"

"Don't you worry." Grandpa winked and stole a sip through the straw. "Gramma's being a silly-head," he whispered, using a Kirsten word.

"I heard that." Grandma closed the fridge.

And they giggled.

Shortly after, Grandpa took Kirsten next door to the pond, but the ducks weren't there that day. Instead they came back in the house and played Chutes and Ladders on the floor in the living room.

Kirsten knew Grandpa was old, not as old as Mrs. Piety next door but old like Grandma, yet there were times like this he did not seem old at all. It wasn't just that he would get down on the floor and play toys with her. Daddy did that too, but with Grandpa it was different. In those moments, Grandpa did not seem like a grown-up pretending--for which all children have a built-in detection system.

He seemed more like an oversized funny-looking kid with gray hair and a shiny bald head.

If Kirsten were older and more articulate, she might have said it was something in his eyes. They were warm, and they were wise, but they were young too, unlike the eyes of so many aging men that the years have stripped of wonder.

There was something special in his presence, a light in the soul that shines through but only a child can fully recognize. Maybe invisible children too.

Kirsten's friend General liked him too. When General first saw him, he had smiled. He had watched Grandpa with his mouth open and eyes squinting, as if thinking very hard.

General usually didn't come with her when Daddy took her away from the house, but he *had* come along last time she went to her grandparents.

This time, General had not.

Kirsten didn't see him until after Daddy picked her up (early, to her disappointment) and took her *home*.

As she cuddled Mister Ben and her daddy drove past the house to park, Kirsten saw General in the yard.

White shirt and beige trousers held up with suspenders, dark hair ruffled, General held the cloth bag that he carried with him always. Kirsten believed it was full of toys, but wasn't sure as General had never opened them.

One day he would, he had promised.

"When the time is right," General had said, which Kirsten accepted but didn't grasp the meaning of. "When I can."

General did not follow her into the house as usual. When she went to the window, holding Mister Ben tightly, she whispered for General to come in, but he shook his head and looked sad. Her face reflecting on the inside of the window glass, Kirsten looked sad too.

Her daddy picked her up and carried her to the couch where he hugged her, telling her how much he missed her. He looked like he might cry, as he did now and then, sometimes when he thought he was alone but Kirsten was watching through a partly open door or listening from the next room.

Everyone was sad it seemed.

"What's the matter, Daddy?"

"Nothing, honey," her daddy said.

She knew he was lying, but said nothing.

He cleared his throat. "I'll make some hamburgers for supper. Does that sound good? With some fries."

It didn't, but she said, "Uh-huh."

He pushed up his glasses that had gathered tears at the bottom of the lenses. "I'll clean up the kitchen and get ready to cook some up. Why don't you go play?"

Kirsten nodded knowingly and went into her room where she played alone until Daddy called her out to eat. She took only a few bites of hamburger and pinches of the bun until it was all white and uneven.

"Are you not hungry, sweetie?" Daddy asked.

Kirsten wasn't, partly because she had a tummy-ache from the goodies her grandparents had spoiled her with. Partly. "Uh-uh. I'm all full."

Daddy smiled, but his eyes did not.

They never seemed to any more.

Afterwards, while Daddy washed the dishes which bumped and clinked in the sink water, Kirsten went back into her room to play.

Her dollies crowded the balcony of an open dresser drawer. They didn't want to be on the floor, because the blue carpet was water and they were scared of sharks, those scary fishies Kirsten saw on TV that ate cute dolphins and sometimes, her daddy told her, gave people boo-boos.

They're animals and animals have to eat too, her daddy had said, but Kirsten thought those animals were mean.

The night before--in the same dead hours of the morning that her daddy had been doing some digging in his sleep--Kirsten had a bad dream.

She dreamt that she had woken up in her room instead of Daddy's, and when she went to get off the bed, saw the floor covered with water.

It lapped against her box-spring and swarmed with hungry sharks. They were flapping, splashing, circling, a festival of boo-boos waiting for Daddy's little princess.

The dream frightened her, but it wasn't so scary *pretending* there were sharks, especially when it was the dollies they meant to eat.

Better them than her.

She eyed her dolls and considered resuming the scene where she left it: with the dolls calling for help and Mister Ben coming to the rescue.

It left her mind when her eyes fell on her piano with the multi-colored keys. She had wanted to play it ever since she heard the musical *thunks* and *dinks* of the dishes, and now she did, sitting with her legs crossed beneath her.

Doll eyes moved.

She sang, striking the notes with the syllables: "*Twin-kel twin-kel lit-tel star how I--*"

"Kirsten," said a scratchy voice.

(*...wonder what you are...*)

She stiffened and looked around. "Daddy?"

"Psst." The voice came from under the bed, where a paw with stitched pads slid out under the bed skirt and pushed it up. Button eyes *blinked* up at her from the face of her number one bear. "I'm down here."

She sprang to her feet, gaping down. "Mister... *Ben?*"

"Shshsh." The bear turned his head, left to right, scanning with eyes that didn't seem like hard plastic any more. They looked soft, watery. "Your daddy can't know I'm alive."

Her eyes grew, mouth twitched a smile that wouldn't come fully because this was as scary as it was wonderful.

"Or I won't be," Mister Ben said sadly. "Any more."

"You won't?"

"I can't." The threads that had made its mouth were now an opening that moved. "That's how the magic works. Magic is for kids, like you. Wonderful special kids. Grownups make the magic stop. They don't believe any more. There's no more

fairy tales and Mister Bens in their hearts." He eyed her.

"But *you* believe. Don't you?"

Kirsten nodded in awe.

How could she possibly not.

"And you're not a grownup," he said, and she shook her head. "Then the magic is yours. If you want to keep it, you mustn't tell."

"I promise."

Mister Ben came out, walking as if there were bones beneath his fur and stuffing. He rubbed his belly. "Is it time for tea yet?"

"Oh, yes. Yes." Kirsten got everything ready and seated at the table her two favorite dollies, who didn't have the luxury of names as Mister Ben did. "Okay, it's--"

"Time for your bath," Daddy said from the doorway.

She tensed, the corners of her mouth jerking down, and she looked sharply to where Mister Ben had been.

And no longer was.

"Can I play for a little longer?" Kirsten gave Daddy the big smile that always made him melt. "*Pleeeeeease.*"

Daddy scratched his chin, pausing. "Welllll...", he said and her smile began to fade. "Okay."

Kirsten hopped with joy, thanked him many times, and as he walked away chuckling, she closed the door.

She craned her head and pounced on the floor.

"Mister Ben," she whispered, lifting the bed skirt. "Are you under there?" Something moved. "It's safe to have tea now."

Mister Ben hesitated in the shadows. "Should I?"

"Yes. Please come out?"

And he did.

He sat at the table and Kirsten poured him some pretend tea. A pinch of fabric folded over the handle of the cup and

Mister Ben raised it to his mouth, making a slurping sound. "Deeeeee-licious," he said, rousing a giggle from Kirsten. "You always make it *so* good."

"I drew a new picture of you." She showed him.

Under an orange sun with radiating red beams, a tall figure in a dress with a riot of squiggly lines for hair held the hand of a teddy bear with an impossibly long arm.

"It's you and Mommy." She lowered the page, frowning. "I wish Mommy wasn't in Heaven."

"She isn't," Mister Ben said, the sides of his face rising to curve his mouth into a smile.

"Yuh-huh. With the angels."

Mister Ben shook his head. "I know where she is," he said, making her jaw lower. "I can take you there too."

"Right now?" she asked, excited, her heart filled with hope. "Can we go now? Please, please, pl--"

"Not now, Kirsten," Mister Ben said, his tone patient. "But soon. Sooner than later."

"Sooner is better."

"Yes." He set down the teacup. "It certainly is."

"Will she be real?" She leaned, raising her brows. "Are you sure you're real? I mean, really *really* real?"

"Oh yes," he said. "I am. If you believe, anything you can imagine is. Anything."

Kirsten scanned the floor, warily. "I sure hope the sharks aren't real."

Mister Ben lifted his eyes behind his cup, and drank.

3

Just a drink. One drink. One goddamned drink.

Pengsy clenched his teeth. Sprawled back on his couch with an empty coffee mug in hand and phone on his lap, he had been watching a movie while he waited for ex-wife Jill to

call, as she promised. The phone was now forgotten and though his eyes stared at the TV, they didn't see it.

He had fallen into himself again, down into his darkness where an emptiness clawed and voices spoke.

You need one. There is too much crazy shit happening right now to NOT have one. Hell, there's too much to just have one or two. The liquor store isn't far. Come on. It will still be open if you hurry.

Pengsy jolted up to his feet. His eyes jerked back and forth in the sockets, chest heaved under his tank tee-shirt, hand tightened its grip on the handle of his mug until the color drained from his knuckles.

"Get out of my head," he rasped under his breath, strangely uncertain if he was talking to the alcohol demon as usual ... or *something else*. "Back off."

His motions stiff, body so tense his bones felt like they might shatter from the pressure, he walked into the kitchen and refilled his mug with coffee.

Then he guzzled it all down--*glug-glug-glug*-- and refilled the mug again. He knew he would make another pot soon and that the three packs of smokes he bought that afternoon would be gone by the next morning.

Whenever it got this bad, he loaded himself up with coffee and smoke and sometimes junk food, maniacally trying to fill that nasty *empty* place inside that drove him crazy, trying to scratch that elusive bastard itch.

Someone once told him that the definition of insanity was doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different outcome from previous times. Maybe that was even true, but he had to do *something*.

He never reached a level of satisfaction this way. Usually he wound up feeling sick or bloated or he kicked his ulcer into gear, which was fine and good. It distracted him from *the*

want. It was a result, and that was better than jack-shit.

And how long will that be enough to stop you? asked a voice inside. *How long before you get too tired from all the work you do to push it back? Before you get fed up and no longer see the point of fighting an enemy that can be knocked down but never dies? How long? How long? You've had rough patches this year. But this time it's more than turbulence and you know it. You can distract yourself all you want from the certainty that you're not gonna land on the runway this time. But it won't change that you're gonna crash. You've been getting worse. Down and down and down you go. Where you stop isn't hard to know, now is it? Just like there's no mystery about when the engine blowout happened that started the final plunge. No mystery at all.*

"Chad," he muttered as he replaced the filter on the coffee machine. "Fuckin' Chad."

Pengsy had needed work badly when Chad offered him the job, but he had wanted to say no just the same. He didn't want any handouts and he didn't want to slip back into old patterns as was known to happen when it came to old friends. He feared working alongside Chad might bring out all those memories that he had done so well in avoiding.

Memories of knocking back suds and good times.

Oh how right he had been. But it hadn't been just that, had it? It was the death of Eric, his cousin he had become close with, his cousin who had been there for him and helped him the most in getting off the booze to begin with.

And then there was that terrible day--

Pengsy tried to slam the door in his mind where the awful image meant to come through.

He wasn't fast enough. *It* was inside now, grinning its corpse grin from beside the rusty freezer, where the apparition had stood in the outer world on that same bitter cold morning they found the old lady rotting on her dining room floor.

Her stink had first drifted over him when he was gabbing with Chad about the freezer that he had just laid eyes on for the first time.

Then, in an eye blink, *he* ... it ... was there.

A scratched-up bicycle helmet framed the pale face of a man with eyes rolled up to shiny whites. Scrapes and dark splotches dotted the flesh, dirt powdered the blue jersey and spandex shorts, and the fanny pack was askew, all as if from the tumble down the cliff beside Echo Valley Road where Eric Pengsy's last ride ended in death not so long ago.

Though this vision must have lasted only a moment, it had felt like much longer, while Pengsy beheld the pale dead thing in the shape of his cousin that he absolutely ... vehemently ... refused to believe in.

While that *thing* gazed back.

Grinning.

Then it was gone.

If only it had *stayed* gone.

Three months after, he had seen the apparition again, walking the street in a stiff zombie walk, all the while looking at the window he watched it from. Two months after: standing on his porch like a bad omen. A month or so after: appearing in that bedroom mirror. Three weeks. Two and a half weeks. Thirteen days. The day they moved the freezer to put it on the truck, the door had fallen off and he saw Eric inside it, gazing from its shadows.

Given that his craves had gotten worse as the episodes became more common, he told himself more than once that sobriety had caused him to crack. Then again, he didn't know what part of himself did the talking: the one with some sense or the alcoholic mind setting him up to make a conclusion that served itself, such as *this is happening because you're not drinking* rather than *you want to drink because this crazy shit*

is happening. Either way, Pengsy did not attribute any hare-brained ideas to the apparition. He did not--*would not--* consider it was a ghost.

He was seeing things not there.

He'd gone schitz.

Yes, it was saner to think he *wasn't sane* ... than to consider it was a ghost. That it was Eric coming back--

Stop! Don't think about it no more!

Pengsy tightened his fists, closed his eyes, and tried to blank his mind.

He had found that some thoughts, such as having a drink or the taste and feeling it brought, were like holes. Once they came, you fell in and had to struggle to get out. He also found that some thoughts summoned the bad things they belonged to. They rang the ears of the demons that waited in the shadows of a man's soul, waited for any excuse to come out and play.

Still as stone, he listened and scanned with the wide eyes of a child that had made a loud sound in a place he shouldn't be and feared being caught.

Oh shit, oh god, no...

He trembled.

It had arrived. He felt it.

Maybe it was staring through a window, or shambling down the hall, or was stepping out of the bedroom mirror that had belonged to the lady at Saybrook as it had the last couple times, but it was there somewhere.

The floor creaked.

His body stiffened and jaw went slack.

The beat of his riled heart filled the world.

He spun around and revolted from the rotting *apparition* that had been standing just behind him. The small of his back slammed against the counter edge. His legs trembled with the want to run, but he could not move.

He could only gape in idiot terror as *it* advanced a step, face to face, and he met its eyes, which he saw now were not rolled up but robbed of all color.

The apparition opened its mouth and the grating voice that left it sounded full of dirt. "*Peng-seeeeeeeeeee...*"

Pengsy shuddered violently, hot piss flowing down and a scream rising up.

"Don't ... deny me."

N I N E

REMINDERS

1

They were everywhere.

At the *Boggs Rentals* office, where each day the crew breezed through and Stuart Sheldon sat behind a cluttered desk with a fancy nameplate, an outdated work list was tacked onto the corkboard that took up half of one wall. The page was folded back around the highlighted entry 'TENANT COMPLAINT RE: JUNKFREEZER AT 32 SAYBROOK, MS ARNEL, REMOVE AND SCRAP' and a note jotted in the bottom corner in Chad Hyman's bad handwriting:

Do Not Take Down!

On the cardboard binding of Chad's notepad for work, in black ink and small but fat letters:

F R E E Z E R

Under a refrigerator magnet in his kitchen at home was a crinkly yellow paper, an old receipt he didn't need, with the same word scrawled in much bigger letters.

On a paper clipped to the top of the visor in his jeep:
Remember the Saybrook freezer that keeps coming back???

On the back of a business card that he had slipped in his wallet over an old picture of him, Trish, and Caroline:

DO NOT FORGET THE FREEZER

And he hadn't for days.

The first thought to jump out in the mornings and the last remaining when sleep came in the nights, it had achieved a steady rhythm in his head. Maybe a little too steady. But he did not trust in that enough to take the reminders down.

He couldn't. He wouldn't.

Every man lived by a code of some kind, whether they did it consciously or not. All men had things that were hard-wired. Chad had trouble forgiving others for deception or trickery, just as he had a hard time forgiving himself for falling for the same trick twice.

Chad refused to be tricked again.

(Tricked by what? A household appliance?)

He refused to forget it again.

The only things *he had* forgotten were all the places that he had left those notes, and although he had thoroughly mulled over whether this was the best way to tackle the problem, he hadn't considered how it might look to others.

Not until he saw the strange look on Trish's face when she asked him about it over breakfast one Monday morning.

"What's with the notes all over the house about a freezer?" Her hair in a bed-head mess and body clad in a frumpy nightgown that made her look very old, Trish eyed him sidelong from where she leaned against the fridge. "I just found another one in the phone book on the inside cover."

He lowered the newspaper and stopped chewing the scrambled eggs with ketchup that he had just shoved between his teeth. He studied her face and the odd look of worry that he had never seen there before.

What is going on with you? that look said. *And is it something to be concerned about?*

He said nothing, at least for the moment while he had a

mouth full of eggs. Trish had that special gift for timing that was the province of waiters and waitresses.

"Mmm-rrgh." Chewing, he raised a finger.

And she raised a brow.

Once the food was down, he told her the truth: "The notes are to jog my memory."

Trish rolled her eyes. "Gee, ya think? *Duuuh*. So you're having problems remembering things?"

"Not things. *A* thing. At least I was."

"What are you supposed to remember about a freezer?"

Chad scratched a corner of his mouth and stood with his plate. "That there *is* a freezer," he said reluctantly.

Trish pursed her lips to one side. "O-kay."

"Don't worry about it." Chad fed the last of his breakfast to the trashcan. "It's a crazy thing. Crazy peculiar thing."

"Peculiar how?"

"Forget about it."

"How can I with all these reminders you left everywhere?" She cocked her head and smiled.

"Oh, for crissake..."

"Can I get rid of them now then?"

"Better not yet. In case."

"In case of what?"

"In case I forget again. *Duh*." He winked.

Trish narrowed her eyes, but looked a trifle more humored rather than angry. "How come you're avoiding telling me about it?"

"Nothing to tell."

"That's a lie."

"Okay, there's too much to tell and things I can't explain. It's junk. Old junk. Rotted." Chad snatched his keys off the counter. "It would take too long to explain and I've gotta get. I'm gonna be late pickin' up Pengsy."

"Does it have something to do with Nina?"

Chad stopped in the doorway. "*Nina?* What the hell would a freezer have to do with Nina?" He swiveled around. "Do you want to *make it* something about Nina?"

"No," she said, frowning. "And I'm sorry about before. You know." Her hands waved around. "When I insinuated... you know."

"I do." Chad wondered where this was coming from. "You all but accused me of bonkin' Nina."

Trish put a hand to her mouth and nodded.

"You oughta know better. I'd never do that to you."

The hand that had been on her mouth moved to her hip and the eyebrow went up again. "You'd never *bonk* me?"

"You know what I mean. I love you. You. Just you."

"Well, we could bonk tonight."

"We could bonk, yes, but will we?"

"That depends if you can fit me in on your list."

"I think I could work some bonking in," Chad said. The conversation moved so fast now that his mind lagged somewhere behind his mouth. "I don't think I would have a problem with that at all. Entirely doable."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. After I beat up some monsters for Buck. Is that a good time for you?"

"It works for me."

"Works for me too. You're not gonna wear that gramma nightie, are you?"

"I could."

"You shouldn't."

"No?" She smirked.

"No."

"I won't then."

"Good. I'll talk to you later."

She gave a nod. "Okay."

"Okay." He walked outside and she came to the door, catching it before it closed.

Her voice trailed behind him. "In the time it took to talk about that, you could have told me about the freezer."

"I don't think I could have," he said without turning around and waved. "Bye."

"Bye." She closed the door.

Chad came down the steps of the back deck and stopped cold. His jaw slid to the side and went lax. He looked back for a moment, blinking.

"Okay..."

Did that just happen?

He started forward again and hitched again, double-taking over his shoulder. Pausing, he smiled and then went to the jeep.

"Okay."

2

Trish hadn't been the first to comment on his reminder system, but the first to have looked at him as if he might have lost a marble. Stu had asked twice about the old work list Chad put up and why a done deal needed to take up real estate on the almighty corkboard, not that Chad bothered to tell him. He didn't feel up to explaining it, not to the likes of Stuart Sheldon anyway.

Art Kroppe had needed no explanation.

Earlier in the week, before the memory of the freezer had finally grown a root in Chad, Art had glimpsed something on his arm while they were leaving a site. Without a word, he took hold of his wrist and raised the arm, reading what Chad had penned there. Art let the arm drop and shook his head, but there was nothing dismissive in the gesture. It was solemn. They were on the same page.

The person most likely to comment about the reminders was Pengsy. He never broached the subject.

Chad knew there was no dependable barometer for when Pengsy was truly off, but had no doubt there were heavy things on his mind. It was in his eyes that stared off, stared *through* things. It was in his *calm*. Chad hadn't liked how edgy Pengsy had been last week, but would take that if given the choice.

The silences that came to Pengsy made Chad uneasy, those pregnant, swollen silences when Chad could almost feel something building up. Like a bad charge. Knowing Pengsy, Chad feared an explosive one. What would happen once it detonated, he didn't know. Sometimes a blind idiot terror stole over him and left behind a vague but strong assurance that he *did not want* to know.

Then it occurred to him that he had simply peered too hard and saw what he wanted to see, tried to fool himself.

To focus on Pengsy and try to pin all the bad vibes on him was convenient, self-serving bullshit. It was looking for the culprit in the most manageable place. Some hidden intuition that Pengsy was going to lose control again, maybe deck somebody on the crew, beat someone bloody over a petty argument at a grocery store, or god forbid start drinking again, or even all of the above would not measure up to the power of the doom Chad felt weighing down, gathering inside him like black thunderheads. He could handle Pengsy at his worst. He knew what to expect. He knew Pengsy.

The real source of all the dread... well, he didn't know what to expect from *that* at all, did he?

It had broken the beat of the real world, defied the mundane, stepped beyond his experience, which had established the task of removing old pieces of junk as routine, ordinary, boring. A no-brainer. Perfectly manageable. You do

it. You move on.

That piece of junk was something much more, which he had only scratched the surface of. What lay beneath, he wanted to find out. He *would* find out. He simply had to.

He fixed what was broken, righted out what went wrong, solved problems. When he identified one, he tackled it to the ground and cranked its arm until it cried Uncle. That was his nature, who he was.

Got a problem and need a solution? Pick up the phone and dial Chad the Handyman. The tougher the job, the better. He lives for this. He'll attack it from every angle until there's impact. He'll use every tool from his belt until he finds the right one. On call 24/7. Never gives up. Always gets the job done. He just can't help himself.

That freezer was no different

He would gnaw on that old rusty bone until he cracked it and worked out the marrow. Yes, he would.

Since the last removal, he had been waiting for *it* to make the next move. It would turn up on his work list again or William Dudley would take the direct route and ring his cell phone instead. That's how Chad would know.

Though it was only a matter of time, he had become wary of waiting for it. A growing sense of urgency trumped his patience and prompted him to visit the scrap yard every few days to check on the status of the freezer.

That afternoon, Chad would bring Pengsy along. He had no means of ditching him and didn't want to wait until after work as usual, because he had a nagging feeling that day might be the day that something happened. They took lunch just before one and raided the Arby's drive-thru menu.

Pengsy was gobbling down his second Beef & Cheddar when Chad turned into the Lemstrom scrap yard.

They passed the office, where that time of day Reggie Kubeske was probably munching on something else that would

give him indigestion or he was out cold in his chair with his hands folded over his belly, and they passed a few rows of flattened cars before Pengsy noticed where they were. He glanced up from the work list he had been staring at as if studying for a test and looked around sharply, blinking, chewing faster.

"Wurda furg werdoin here?"

"Stopping," Chad said. "And eating lunch."

"Here?"

"Here."

Chad pulled up beside a collection of rotted stoves and backed across the dirt road where he parked in the weeds between a scorched bus and a skeleton of a trailer, the jeep angled toward what he had come to see.

It stood in the same place and position as the last times. A speck of sunlight reflected off the rusty handle of the door. Unhinged, the door leaned against the opening to the shadowy inside of the freezer.

Too shadowy it seemed.

Hairs on the back of Chad's neck prickled as he remembered having that terrible flash of Chris Purvis, driver of that ill-fated trip to Deadsville in 1988 that Chad had escaped by choosing scissors instead of paper.

(You missed your ride.)

(C'mon, Hammer Man. Let's ride.)

He opened his drive-thru bag on his lap, pulled out a napkin which he spat his gum into, and produced his lunch.

Pengsy gazed ahead now through the windshield, the corner of his mouth twitching. "I can't believe... you came here because of that thing. Tell me you didn't."

"I did."

"For why? To see if it'll do tricks?"

"Think it'll do some?"

Pengsy eyeballed him, muscles in his face tightening, and Chad wondered why he looked close to punching him. Pengsy drew a big breath through his nose, flared his nostrils, and dropped his gaze to the clipboard.

Blinking, Chad didn't comment.

"Did Art ever find the straps he used that day?" Pengsy asked, his voice neutral. "He said he lost them."

"Again." Chad sniggered. "They were brand new. To replace the other set he managed to lose."

A silence passed while Chad ate and Pengsy smoked.

"Good to know you remember it." Chad gestured ahead to the freezer when Pengsy looked at him blankly.

"Why wouldn't I?" Pengsy said.

"Now I guess you've forgotten forgetting."

"You really are gettin' goofy in the head, ain't ya?"

"Could be," Chad said noncommittally, and worked at his last roast beef sandwich.

Meanwhile, his mind ran through the last time they hauled it off the hill, beat by beat, over and over.

His eyes stuck on something.

Chad inclined his head, jaw loosening. "How's your attention to detail?"

"Eh?"

"Look at it. Tell me what's wrong."

"Ain't nothin' wrong," Pengsy said too quickly, before he even looked up. When he did, he shrugged a shoulder. "It's like we left it."

"The door."

"What about it? The damn thing busted off, remember?"

"I do." Chad nodded, biting down on a lip. "And before the door busted off the freezer, the handle busted off the door."

Pengsy said nothing and kept his eyes down.

"It's like it's putting itself back together," Chad thought aloud, and then doubted his own words somehow. "What do

you think? For god's sake, just take a look."

"Don't want to."

"Cuz you'd see I'm right."

"No. Cuz I want nothin' to do with your craziness."

Chad grimaced and realized he was going to be alone on the matter. "If you'd look, you'd see too. But now I reckon you want to pretend nothin' unusual happened."

"Works for me," Pengsy said, nearly sneering.

His appetite now a ghost, Chad stuck his sandwich back into the bag and crumpled it. "Well, I can't say the same."

Pengsy sniggered without humor. "Which is why you're eating lunch in a nasty junkyard. No shit."

Chad gave the freezer one more hard look over. It felt wrong there as it had in the weedy clearing up the hill, but it was a different kind of wrong he couldn't put his finger on. He felt as if he had lost his line on it, even though it stood there in his field of vision, there in the most manageable place: in the scrap yard where he put it.

What do I do when I lose something? he thought disjointedly. *I keep looking in the last place I saw it or where I think it's supposed to be. No matter how many times I search and find it ain't there, I keep coming back to that spot. Cuz that's where it should be.*

But it's never there. It never is.

Chad ditched the food bag, fed a fresh stick of gum in his mouth, and keyed the engine. "I shouldn't have come here."

"You said it," Pengsy murmured.

I shouldn't have come here. Not here.

3

Chad intended to drive to the Saybrook property after work and he dropped off Pengsy. He hadn't counted on all hell

breaking loose at the *Clint Street Apartments* complex. Perhaps the first testament to Henry Boggs's lapsing judgment, Boggs bought the building seven years back for a song and a dance and got what he paid for--worrisome foundation, old faulty wiring, ancient pipes, warts and all.

A pipe had burst and caused a chain reaction of problems in the building, not to mention a carnival of angry phone calls from the senior citizens who called it home.

He expected a fight when he phoned Trish and told her he wouldn't be home till late. She had been unusually understanding. The magnetic poles of that woman seemed to flip-flop in cycles. Then again, it might have had something to do with the *alone time* they had scheduled.

"Eight or nine I reckon," he had told her, guessing.

He didn't walk in until just before ten, again expecting conflict. At first he wasn't sure anybody was home. The house was dim and too quiet. Then, as he entered the living room, he heard a TV overhead.

Dirty, sweaty, smelling like a sewer, Chad headed up the stairs and cracked a smile when he heard Buck giggling in the master bedroom. That was a sound he could never get tired of, if only he heard it more often.

He stopped in the doorway. Unnoticed at first, he watched Trish and Buck playing on the bed where a dozen toys were strewn like casualties from the battle with the dreaded Tickle Monster that still raged on, an epic struggle that played out regularly when Buck was pre-school.

Between that, both Trish and Buck being in a good mood *at the same time* in an event as rare as a planetary alignment, Trish allowing Buck to bring his toys into their bedroom which had long been a titanic NO-NO, and Trish having dolled up her face and hair, not to mention put on the silk nightie and robe he bought for her two Christmases ago and hadn't seen on her since, Chad decided the latter surprised him the most.

Had she done this for him? For her old boring grease-monkey tool man of a hubby? *For him?* He didn't know what other explanation there was.

Young, soft, incredibly kissable, she looked closer to the woman he had fallen in love with than she had in a long while. It wasn't just the dolling-up part, but that fun-loving light in her eyes. God, he wished he could make it stay this time.

"Oh." She finally noticed him and tucked wild strands behind her ears. "Hi." When she turned to Buck and announced, "Daddy's home!" this would have normally sent the kid charging at him. *Daddy! Daddy!* But Buck was still in play mode and probably enjoying this much attention from Mommy, who Chad suspected dismissed him with a go-play-in-your-room command a little too often.

"Tick-oo me." Buck giggled. "Where's the tick-oos? Where's--"

"Right *here!*" Trish cried with glee and sicked the Tickle Monster on him again.

He laughed so hard that he ceased to make a sound.

Chad laughed too as he walked in and gathered clothes from his dresser. "I'm a mess and need a shower. Caroline sleeping?"

"No. I mean, I don't know. She's sleeping at a friend's."

"Are you sure she's at this friend's?"

"Yes. I arranged it."

"You... Oh."

"Mmm-hmm."

"Okay then." Chad headed for the door. "Buck. When I get out, we'll beat us up some monsters in the closet so you can go night-night. 'Kay, Buck? *Buck?*"

"Tick-oo me! Tick-oo meee-heee-heee."

While Trish kept the *tickoos* coming, she nodded to him with eyes that were distinctly Come Hither.

Thinking he was in a good kind of trouble, Chad winked before he walked off to the bathroom.

The hot shower felt great, perhaps too great. When he stepped out of the steam and looked at his watch on the sink, he saw forty minutes had passed and Trish might have lost her Come Hither thoughts. If she hadn't, he supposed they would hang in the balance while he tried to get Buck to sleep, which he feared could take longer than usual now that the boy was wound up.

Good going. First opportunity at some naked time with the missus in months and you muck it up.

"Damn." He wrestled into a tee-shirt and sweatpants, brushed his hair quickly, and for once didn't take the time to examine how much of his scalp was showing through before he scooted down the hall.

He expected to find Buck still jazzed up and Trish on the bed glaring at him, maybe smoking to make a statement.

What he found was them both asleep, smiling, and lying aslant, hogging the bed. Trish was on her side holding Buck, Buck holding a stuffed doggie with one arm and plugging his mouth with the thumb of the other. They looked happy, peaceful, and he didn't want to meddle with that, especially if the result would be Buck wide awake and Trish peeved that he took so long.

"I shouldn't," he whispered to himself, pausing.

Delicately, he tried to move Buck, but he whined in his sleep in protest and Trish tightened her hold on him.

He tried once more with the same result and decided to leave them be. There would be other nights.

Leaning, he kissed Trish's forehead and pulled the blanket over them. He grabbed his pillows, turned down the TV which would offer enough light for Buck to see where he was and not be scared if he woke, and he shut off the lights on the way out.

Once again, Chad laid down on the couch and supposed he would spend the next hours staring at the ceiling. He didn't know how tired he was. Sleep came suddenly. The black grabbed him and pulled him under into a dream about the last day he saw Danny Rothman.

Most of it played out as it had happened. Walking into the living room where 'The Today Show' was on TV. The exchange with Abby Arnell, who told them about the water acting up. Danny sneezing and Abby starting in on him about germs. *Betty next door caught a bug that's had her in bed for a week. I want nothing to do with that.* Abby asking about her missing cat. Chad and Danny going downstairs and diagnosing the water tank. Chad talking to Art on the phone, sending Danny out for some pipe wrap, and then going up after him when time passed and he didn't return. The look of fright and disgust on Abby's face as she stared down her remote at the TV she had switched off. *The things they get away with these days.* Chad walking outside into the blowing snow where he found the back hatch of his jeep open and no sign of Danny except the footprints that dragged off through the snow toward--

THE FREEZER, his mind screamed. WHERE THE FREEZER WAS.

Then he saw it, a standing rotted monument to a real-life nightmare that happened in the

(Hoad)

house no longer there. The door swung open with a dull roar that filled the world, drowned Chad's scream, and unleashed a surge of blood.

Human giblets, severed limbs, bones, skulls, it all exploded out as if a dam of Hell had burst.

And Chad awoke with a start.

He jerked upright and his heart jumped at the

unexpected presence at the end of the couch. He caught a scream before it boomed out, coming out as a strangled cry.

"I didn't mean to scare you," Trish said in the dark.

Chugging breaths, he waited for his eyes to adjust. He made out her shape and her robe just barely, enough to know it was her and not...

Not what? What?

"I had a... bad dream." He let himself fall back on his pillows, wiped the sweat from his forehead, rubbed his temple, and closed his eyes. "Bad dream."

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry you woke up. I tried to move Buck and--"

"It's okay."

"You looked so comfortable. I didn't wanna..."

"You can *always* wake me." She climbed onto him. "For this."

When she slipped under his blanket and pressed against him, he realized what she had done while his eyes were closed. After the dream and the horrible realization it brought, he didn't think he was in the mood, but another part of him had risen to the call of duty.

"What's that?" she asked, and they both knew very well what *that* was.

She trailed kisses across up his chest, around his mouth, and to the side of his neck where it met his skull, her breasts rubbing against him all the while.

"You're naked," he said.

It was all that came to mind.

"Uh-huh," she whispered, and her breath in his ear made him shiver. "What are you gonna do about it, Hammer Man?"

Chad showed her, and forgot about the dark clouds hanging over him. For a little while.

4

Trish was out not long after the good times ended, snug between him and the back of the couch. At best he had rested his eyes between long staring sessions at the ceiling while he waited for a child to wake up, discover he was alone, and scream his head off. When that didn't happen, he verged on worry.

The first thing he did after he maneuvered himself off the couch around five AM was go upstairs to check on Buck, who slept so soundlessly that Chad made sure he was alive.

Next he got dressed and went to the bathroom, where he wrestled the temptation posed by a pack of cigarettes on a shelf. Trish probably smoked them in there with the door closed and fan venting, rather than elsewhere in the house which he frowned on.

You could sneak one in now and nobody will ever know, said a voice inside.

I'll know, he told that voice. *That's what matters.*

Through blue pools of twilight from the windows, he lumbered down into the kitchen. He started the coffee pot and sat at the table with a Vineyard County phone book and his cell. He called Art, who he knew to be a second shift sleeper and would be up.

"You're off to an early start, rooster," Art answered, his groggy voice casting doubt on whether he had been awake.

Chad grimaced, remembering that Art worked late just like the rest of them at Clint Street Apartments.

"A bit," he said. "I'm sorry. I shoulda waited--"

"Doesn't make a difference now." Art gave a chortle that became a cough. "Please don't tell me something else has gone

wrong in that godforsaken building."

"No. Not that I know of at least." Chad opened the phone book. "Are you working with Woody today?"

"Uh. Ya-up."

"What about Skee?"

"Skeila's been all kinds of torked that he ain't had a partner since Joe left and Stu paired the FNG up with Conrad. Is that what this is about?"

"No." Chad flipped through the A's and slowed, squinting at the print which he swore they made smaller and smaller every year. "But why not give him Woody for the day. I need to fly solo today, so I'll give you Pengsy."

Art snorted. "What kinda trade is that? Pengsy's had a tire iron up his ass."

"You've noticed that too, huh. Listen. It's important. I've got personal errands to run."

"Personal errands. Well, *I'll be.*" Art guffawed. "You're human after all."

"Please?" Chad found fifteen or so listings for Beamish and stopped his gaze on:

BEAMISH, Thomas C 15 Oates Road, S Valley....

Art sighed on the line. "You'll owe me one."

"I didn't doubt it. One more thing. Do you happen to know Tom Beamish who used to work for Boggs some years back?"

"Beamish? Not well."

"Is he still local?"

"Lives in the valley someplace. Close to downtown cuz I see him walking most mornings."

"Oates Road?"

"Sounds right. What do you want from Tom?"

"Some insight."

"Best of luck on that. He's become quite the nut-job."

5

Chad had started dialing Tom's number many times and stopped, at a loss for what to say. Every time he put together words in his head, they rang absurd and he considered the whole thing really was as ridiculous as it sounded. Nevertheless he had to pursue it. He wouldn't be able to do that over the phone it seemed, but knew that going to see Tom in person would force him to say *something*. Yes, that was the only way he might get what was on his mind out his mouth.

At quarter after seven, after spending twenty minutes parked on the cul-de-sac at Saybrook where he peered into the weedy clearing and didn't see the freezer, Chad drove to Oates Road.

He parked his jeep across the street from house 15, a small brown duplex that leaned slightly to one side, as if it wanted to collapse on the gravel driveway and put the battered station wagon parked there out of its misery.

A cat stood watch on a porch railing, box fans in the downstairs windows blew the air in against drapes that were in a constant flutter, and Chad heard a holler now and then that came from inside, the peaks of a loud voice talking.

Twenty-some minutes and two gum sticks later, Chad got out and walked up onto the porch. There, a litter box stank to holy heaven, wires snaked from a hole where a doorbell should be, and a faded welcome mat lay crooked with one letter worn away.

WE COME, it now read, and Chad didn't know what it was about those words in particular staring up from the dusty boards of the porch that bothered him.

WE COME

He knocked, waited, and knocked harder.

"You've got the wrong rhythm, son," a voice said behind the door that trembled as locks clicked and bolts clanked.

The door opened and a white-haired man peered through tortoise frame glasses. Pudgy, late sixties, and clad in a long striped smoking jacket one would expect on an eccentric millionaire, he crossed his arms. "Are you a Democrat?"

"Uh." Chad had a feeling that the wrong answer would be a deal-breaker. He saw a cross on the wall inside and weighed odds. "No."

"Faggots and baby killers." The man shook his head gravely. "That's all they are."

Chad nodded slowly.

I'll take bigots and zealots for 400, Alex.

"I work as a handyman for Boggs. I'm Chad Hyman an--"

"High man?"

"Hyman. H-Y-M."

"I know who you are. You're *the man*." The man thrust two pointed fingers at him. "Who took the *and* ... out of handyman!"

Chad wouldn't get it until later when he thought back and wouldn't find it funny as Tom had. By then, humor would be very hard to come by.

A chain of laughs rattled out of the man, peeping out and snorting in. "You can't fool a fooler." A hand to his chest and the other rubbing his eyes beneath his glasses, he settled down. "Now who are you *really*?"

"I don't fool."

The man silenced, his smile gone.

"You're Tom Beamish?" Chad already knew, of course, despite the man's blank face. If this wasn't a nut-job, he didn't know what one was. Figuring he would be no help at all, Chad

cut to the chase. "I've come to ask you about a job you did with Henry Boggs, my boss. A lotta years ago. Up at thirty-four Saybrook. Where the house burned down. Do you remember?"

"Sure I do."

"Okay." Chad supposed Tom would give the same response if asked whether he remembered the Revolutionary War. "This was over twenty-five years ago. Are you su--"

"*People* were scared of that place." Tom leaned, eyes gazing over the rim of his glasses. "Cuzza Eddy Hoad and Winslow. Richie *Mister light-the-whole-thing-up* Winslow."

That long-ago event being at the surface of Tom's mind unnerved Chad as much as his sudden appearance of clarity.

"Nobody'd been there since." Tom turned away. "As long as you ain't a Democrat, come in."

Chad did. With reservations.

Given of the look of the house and of the man, he expected a filthy place cramped with pack-rat clutter. Pengsy's apartment times ten.

Instead, the house looked mostly empty. The living room was clear save for a stool used as an end-table, a wooden chair facing a TV stand with no TV, and a simple coffee table covered with old mail and newspapers. Pages rustled in the breeze from the window box fans. The air was humid and sour with the stink of dirty laundry. Garbage bags overstuffed with it lined the front wall beneath the dancing window drapes.

Chad eyed the nails sticking out the walls, many with cobweb tufts hanging off them. "Are you moving out?"

"*The weeds*," Tom said from beside him, giving him a start, and he studied the wall where Chad had been looking. "Seven years growth. No matter. They were higher than I ever seen. Up to my chin." He pointed to it. "Right here. Right here."

Chad tried not to grimace at Tom's rancid breath as Tom

turned his face and leaned.

"It was as if..." Tom's eyes jerked to the side and slid back to the middle. "Nature was *trying to hide* what was left. Hide the rubble. And the other things. It felt wrong when I mowed it down." He turned away and walked. "It felt all wrong."

"What other things?" Chad followed him and glanced down a hall of missing doors. "Reggie Kubeske said you and Henry hauled a bunch of junk down to Lemstrom."

"We saw some of it right away. The rest when I brought the weeds down." Tom walked into the kitchen where a pot of soup simmered on the stove over the mess of duct-tape that held the oven door closed.

"Did you see a..." Chad stopped in the doorway as his gaze fell on more hinges holding nothing.

Have you got something against doors? he wanted to ask, and a moment later found he didn't need to.

"There was lots of things out there," Tom went on. "Smashed up TV. Fridge. Stove. And other appliances. Lots of appliances."

Silent, Chad looked at the heap of pots and pans on the table and scanned the rest of the kitchen.

Tom plucked a spoon from the silverware tray on the counter, which was cluttered with empty cans that trailed around a sink full of dishes. The windows over it were nailed shut, cupboard doors off, shelves dusty and sparsely stocked with canned food, and every drawer was missing.

"Madness," Tom said. "That's what made Richie burn that house down they say. First he dragged or chucked out all them damn appliances from the house. Was like... 'fore the voices *in his cracked head* told him the whole thing had to go, he thought it was them appliances that was the cause of all his troubles."

Chad stared at the drawers and cupboard doors that were piled in a dusty heap where the refrigerator should have been.

No fridge either, he thought, mildly alarmed. *The man has no fridge.*

"You ... think that?"

"That's what they say." Tom stirred the soup, its steam rising and fogging his tortoise frame glasses. "And they was right. As right as a ripe rutabaga in a fat lady's pie!"

Chad passed the table and gazed into a mini-bathroom.

The covers to the toilet and its seat were missing, as was the door to the medicine cabinet over the sink.

"I found a book crammed in the toaster," Tom said, and his voice seemed very far away while Chad's gaze swept the pharmacy of tranquilizers, anti-depressants, and--he was fairly sure--anti-psychotics. "Even charred like he'd cooked the damn book. Cook the book I say. Christ the King, I tell no lie. And it was a *Hoad* book."

"Ed Hoad," Chad said, voice small, turning slowly. "He was some kinda writer. Right?"

Tom no longer tended to his soup. He stood behind the table, squinting at Chad as if trying to make him out. "There was pages marked. And pages where Richie Winslow drew lines under things like schoolkids do."

"This book. What was..."

Chad's voice fell away again, body tensed, and eyes locked on the gun on the table.

It gleamed on a frying pan with a dozen loose bullets.

The idea of this unstable man owning a gun sent a chill through him and his heart beat rose in his ears.

"Lins, gobhoblins, hobgoblins," Tom seemed to babble, his voice quiet and eyes following Chad as he crept past the table. "Bogloblins?"

"I've got work to do today." Chad couldn't keep the tremble out of his voice any more than he could stop darting his eyes between Tom and the gun. "I can see now I'm wastin'

your time."

"You're scared."

"Not scared." Chad was.

"You're scared cuz you know! *You know!*"

Closer to the doorway, closer, Chad said, "I came to ask about a freezer, but I made a mist--"

"What!" Tom cried in horror, giving Chad a start.

His heart nearly jumped out of his chest when Tom swept the pot off the stove by the handle. Chad motioned to run just as Tom lobbed it in his path.

"Aunt Jemima ate a can of tuna!" Tom screamed as the pot hit the wall and boiling soup splashed.

A jet of it hit Chad's hand and he leaped back toward the bathroom with a growl of pain.

"What the hell's wrong with you, son!" Tom came around the table, his face red, eyes enormous. *"Hot enough in this damned place without you tryin' to raise the fires'a Hell in here!"* He lobbed a saucepan, which Chad ducked. "I saw the devil! *I saw the devil inside it!*"

"Stay away from me, you crazy bastard." Chad walked toward the living room again, his head cocked over his shoulder, not daring to fully turn his back. "I'm going. I'm..."

Tom snatched up the gun quickly, quicker than Chad thought the old man could move, and started firing.

BOOM! BOOM!

The first bullet went over his shoulder. Chad leaped through the doorway as the second round blew a chunk off it with a burst of splinters. Pain screamed up from a twisted ankle and he threw himself against the wall.

Tom fired another bullet. It whizzed into the living room and blasted through a fan with a starburst of sparks.

Panting, Chad realized he was on the wrong side of the door and would have to move into Tom's line of fire to make for the front door. He listened for footsteps, but there were none

and Tom's voice kept the same distance.

"Red man with horns laughing at me from the fire and stirrin' that cauldron up to get it ready," Tom said, his voice breaking. "For me. Cuzza what I did to those kids."

Kids? Chad didn't want to know.

"I stayed away. But they kept finding me. I thought I kept 'em away for good, but they came back. I tried to keep 'em back again, but they come. They always come." The gun cocked. "They told me you were comin' too."

Chad jerked upright, ready to bolt.

Tom fired again at hearing the sudden motion and glass shattered in the window over the fan still running.

"Calm down!" he said, knowing it sounded stupid and Tom wasn't about to calm down. "Nobody's gonna hurt you. I didn't come..." He ran out of breath and drew in another as he checked his ankle. "To hurt you."

"You can't stop 'em! They told me what I gotta do so that devil won't get me and I ain't gon' be no beef in the devil's stew." Tom's voice degenerated into a child-like whine. "I ain't gon' be gobbled up. *Gibgoblins ain't gon' gobble me up!*"

Just as Chad took one more breath and was a beat away from a daring move he was sure would get him killed...

Tom Beamish fired his gun one last time.

Dead weight hit the floor.

And there was silence.

Slowly, Chad rose fully to his feet, pushing himself up the wall, his head beside the doorway to the kitchen where Tom yelled and ranted no more.

"Tom?" Chad said.

He called his name many times.

Knowing there would be no answer.

T E N

MISTER BEN LEADS THE WAY

1

Sounds of trouble rose out of town.

William Dudley tensed where he stood on his driveway before a sweeping view that hadn't lost its novelty. He heard the wail of sirens. They echoed through the valley in a full chorus of primal tones that call for attention and haunt the hearts of those who know their tragic nature too well. They reached up the hill and gripped his insides like cold hands.

Disembodied moans that were high and damp, the mournful cries of ghosts rising and falling in the trees all around him, they caused his eyes to settle on the walled corner of Homeland Cemetery visible from there and called up a memory from the night of Deborah's death.

He had been reading on the sofa beside a window overlooking the street. Kirsten had been sitting next to him with a book of her own, waiting for Mommy to read for her as happened every night. Kirsten kept asking where Mommy was, reminding William that he didn't know and making him check the time which had rolled long past when Deborah should have arrived.

He remembered how he tensed when he heard the sirens growing from the distance. They were common sounds, background noise that most people are only marginally aware of unless it has something to do with them or someone they know. William had been the same, at least when he knew

precisely where his loved ones were. That time he didn't, and as the ambulances and fire trucks zipped past with a loud whoop of sirens and flashes of red light, his mind churned up the familiar: *Oh my god what if...* He was no stranger to that thought, so familiar now that the fear attached to it was diluted because he had been wrong all the times before. That time he wasn't.

Those sounds, those wailing sirens, are seldom for someone you know. But sometimes they *are*.

They're always for someone.

He glanced over his shoulder to make sure Kirsten was still in the yard, and she was. After the breakfast of soup and grilled cheese which Kirsten had asked for, he had brought her outside to play so he could keep an eye on her while he tackled the yard work. Having seen the weather that called for 90s, he wanted to mow the lawn early while the heat was still bearable.

His gaze slid to the side and mind returned to the thought that had led him down to the pavement to begin with, a memory that went forgotten for days at a time only to spring up unexpectedly like a mechanized monster in a carnival spook-house.

William gave *the clearing* a hard look over.

The clouds had passed. The sunshine was plentiful, the trees and weeds and wild flowers vibrant. He saw no freezer or any sign it had been there, which made him feel better.

William walked into the yard and spotted Betty trimming her bushes that jutted out along the property line from alongside her garage. Wearing a sun hat and her apron over a paisley dress, Betty noticed him and waved smilingly, the wave one might expect from a starlet at a movie premiere.

Awkwardly, he returned the wave and looked at Kirsten, who was off in her own little world.

Clad in a red shirt and overalls with a hush puppy print, her blond hair in pigtails, Kirsten sat on the walkway with her legs folded under her. She played with plastic zoo animals and a Barbie car while Mister Ben watched from the front steps.

What a wonderful thing it is to be a kid. To be so innocent. Care-free. If only we stayed that way forever.

Smiling at that thought, William started up his trusty mower which had run faithfully for going on four years.

The front yard had grown unevenly, the side closest to Betty's property up to the ankle and fraught with weeds, and William had to change the grass-catcher bag twice. Both times when he walked beside the house and emptied the bag on the edge of the woods with Kirsten out of eyeshot, he returned with a horrible feeling that she would be gone, and was relieved that she wasn't.

Will you just relax, Deborah's voice said inside. She's fine. She's always fine. You're going to go gray before you hit forty if you keep living in fear this way for no good reason. You overanalyze everything. You're scared of everything.

He went to Kirsten. "Come on, sweetie. It's time to play in the back yard. Daddy's got to mow on the other side of the house. Let's get your toys."

She shrugged as if it didn't matter.

When he reached for her teddy bear, she darted past his leg and seized it, shielding it against her chest.

"What's the matter? You want to carry Mister Ben?"

She smiled as if it had been a game. "Yes!"

"O-kay." He chuckled and gathered her animals into the play car. "All aboard."

Once he had Kirsten settled by the back door, he retrieved the lawnmower and got to work.

After one lap across the yard, the engine quit.

It fired up again with no problem.

Then it stalled again, and again, each time he moved

three or four feet with it. He checked the oil and gas, checked to see if the bag intake was choked, checked everything he could think of, and snatched glances at Kirsten. After more failed attempts, he turned the mower on its side to look at the blades. Also fine. Next, he tinkered with the spark plug.

When he next glanced at Kirsten, he did a double-take.

His brows furrowed, mouth curved into a puzzled smile.

Before now, he had never seen her play that way.

He saw Kirsten on her feet, her hands holding the teddy bear with one arm bent out, body swaying and turning, a little girl in overalls and pigtails doing a waltz with good old Mister Ben.

He could easily imagine Deborah saying, *Isn't that the most adorable thing you've ever seen?*

And William would have agreed.

2

"Adorable, dorable, a-bull-a-bull, adorable," gibbered the apostles from the painting in Betty Morgan's dining room, their voices nasal and trebly.

The background doorway and windows flickered with lightning from the black clouds roiling over the landscape.

Cobwebs over the long table swayed in a breeze that reached beyond the painting, stirring the cloth on the dining room table.

Within the frame of the painting, inside the painted border that writhed with bugs caught in spider webs, the demon apostles celebrated.

Thaddaeus was hunched over a plastic cup with a smiley face drawn on it, blowing bubbles through a straw.

Judas loosened and tightened the cap on his airplane whiskey bottle, loosening, tightening, loosening, tightening,

without removing it, but looking as if he wanted to and soon would.

Peter and Philip waltzed on the table-top, hands clasped, robes swaying, faces stretched, heads pitched back with the points of their ears peeking out from their hair in flashes. Their jutting jaws were agape, quivering from the mad giggles machine-gunning from their throats.

The other apostles rocked and clapped crazily on their chairs, like inmates from an otherworldly asylum at a lively church revival.

In the center, stately in his posture, the leader gazed down at an empty plate with a shark-toothed grin.

3

Only minutes before, while William had been arguing with the mower and had yet to tip it for a look at the underside, Kirsten was playing with the zoo animals. They were gathered around the two she had in her hands, a giraffe who was sad because she couldn't find her mommy and an elephant, who tried in vain to console the giraffe.

"No, I'll never find her," said the giraffe's teeny voice from Kirsten's mouth. "She's gone. Gone forever."

Kirsten, a familiar voice said, and she looked down to her lap where Mister Ben no longer was. *Over here.*

She stood, looked around sharply, and found him.

Mister Ben stood in a patch of weeds with one fluffy paw on the corner of the house and the other waving. "Hurry. You must hurry if you wish to see her."

"Who?" she asked inaudibly.

"It's time." Mister Ben looked around nervously with his watery button eyes. "If we don't hurry, she may be gone."

"Mommy," Kirsten gasped.

Only yesterday had he promised.

Mister Ben was a bear who wasted no time at all.

Forgetting about Daddy as the excitement swept her away, Kirsten followed her magic bear alongside the house, through its shadow that reached toward the clearing.

"Don't go," said a voice behind her.

She looked back and saw General.

In his white shirt and trousers with suspenders, General looked worried. His eyes were wide under his bangs, hands clutching his cloth bag. "Go back. Don't listen to it."

"Mister Ben's gonna take me to--"

"That's not Mister Ben," General said, and Kirsten looked down at the bear's sad eyes.

"Uh-huh. And Mister Ben's taking me to see m--"

"It's not taking you to see your mommy. It lies."

General's eyes moved to Mister Ben and back to her. "It's not Mister Ben."

"You're so silly." Kirsten smiled down at her teddy bear, the same one that had appeared in her arms one morning and that Mommy had told her was special.

Whenever you miss me, all you have to do is cuddle Teddy, Mommy had said. *Because if you're close to Teddy, you're close to me too.*

Really? Kirsten had said, amazed.

Yes. But it's our secret. Teddy's special. When you hug Teddy, I feel the hugs. And I'm there with you.

His name's not Teddy, Kirsten had told her. *It's Ben. It's Misser Ben.*

"We're gonna go see Mommy," Kirsten insisted. "Come with us. And I'll show you."

"Your mommy is in Heaven." General frowned. "It's not taking you there. It's taking you someplace bad!"

Kirsten gave General the mad face. "You'll see."

She turned and carried on with Mister Ben.

"*Someplace bad!*" General cried. "They're gonna eat you up! The sharkies are going to *eat you up!*"

"There's no sharkies," Kirsten said, still moving.

"If you go there, you won't come back. Not ever."

Kirsten stopped and looked back at General, uncertainly at first. "I have to. I have to get my mommy. I have to."

General shook his head.

His soft brown eyes hopeful, Mister Ben held up his paw.

And she took it.

"Thank you, Kirsten," Mister Ben said in his scratchy little voice.

They angled through the weeds, skirting a corner of the pavement, and stopped in the clearing, which had blossomed into a beautiful garden. An upright rectangle of light stood by the tree line. Brighter and brighter, it shined on a little girl and her bear.

"My baby," a voice said from that light, a voice that filled Kirsten's heart with joy, so much she stumbled. "I've missed you... *soo much.*"

For a moment, Kirsten was frozen.

"Mommy?"

"Yes, baby." Silhouettes of winged angels appeared and the shape of Deborah Dudley appeared between them. Her long blond hair fluttering in a breeze, her gown flowing, she smiled at Kirsten. It was the same smile Kirsten saw on many nights as her mommy read her stories about dragons and unicorns and elves, the kind of smile that lights up the whole face. It lit up Kirsten's heart. "Come to me." Mommy's voice cracked and she threw out her arms. "Oh, please, come to mommy."

Kirsten did not walk but ran for the light, where she believed she would find her mother's loving arms at last.

Closer and closer.

She slowed to a walk, then to an uncertain stop only feet

away from the door ... to *the other place*.

As much as she wanted to go through it to the source of that beautiful light, wanted to be with Mommy, she was suddenly scared and didn't know why.

(The sharkies are going to eat you up.)

(*Animals have to eat too.*)

"What about Daddy? If I go get Daddy, will you wait? He misses you too."

Mommy tilted her smiling face. "We'll go get him together. It'll be a surprise." A chuckle jerked from her throat. "A wonderful surprise."

Kirsten nodded in bliss. "Yes, yes."

Mommy then inclined her face the other way and looked at her sidelong. "But I can't get out alone. You'll have to help mommy." She reached. "Take my hand and help me out. Only you can do it."

Kirsten drifted closer.

"Only you, baby."

A shadow crept over the weeds and over Kirsten as she reached for what looked like her mother's hand, soft and slender with wedding rings, but felt nothing like it when it closed over hers. Clammy flesh pressed against hers. Bony fingers squeezed. Nails dug into her flesh.

Something rough and rubbery clapped over her mouth from behind when she tried to scream.

Hands grabbed and pulled, as if she were a doll that a mob of strange children fought over.

Kirsten heard a choir of giggles before the light dispelled with a flash.

4

William Dudley's worst nightmare began with a stalling lawnmower and that one last look over his shoulder when he didn't see his daughter dancing strangely with her teddy bear as he had only a moment before.

She was gone, her teddy bear face down on the grass.

"Kirsten?"

Calling her name, his voice rising and pace quickening to a scramble as he hurried through the house and back outside into the woods, his adrenaline gushing and heart trip-hammering, *he could not find her*.

He was hysterical before he called the police, sobbing when he did, standing in the woods near the house screaming Kirsten's name at the top of his voice, wailing like a tortured soul at the skies of Hell when the first patrol car showed up.

A hulk of a town cop named Paul Kemp played twenty questions, following procedure and keeping his cool admirably as William ranted and shouted in his square face about all the crucial moments being lost while Kirsten could be wandering farther away or *being taken* farther away by some kidnapper with horrible intentions.

Within hours cars filled the drive, flashers spun on those from the SVPD and county sheriff's office, Joe and Mary showed up soon after, and every minute stretched into terrible eternities when anything could be happening to Kirsten, *anything*, and there was nothing William could do.

Police and volunteers they rounded up combed the woods and William was not allowed to join the effort because he only worsened as the night wore on. All circuits of reason in his mind shut down. He had been so very careful, kept her in sight as much as humanly possible every day of every week knowing that it only took a moment to lose her in a terrible

world that lurked with countless dangers and sick people capable of anything, just a moment, and a moment was all it took. The nightmare came true, just as the voices deep inside had always told him it would, all because he let his guard down for that one goddamned moment, and he could *not* cope with that.

One of the counselors stared through thick glasses. "You are in no condition to be out there--"

"She's my daughter!" William shouted, his voice raw from a wealth of crying and shouting before. He struggled, thrashed in the hold of Officer Kemp and a Sheriff's Deputy. "She needs me!"

"We're aware that you lost your wife recently and--"

"Let me go-o-o-o-o!"

"You settle down, Mister Dudley," Paul Kemp said. He had just returned from another scene downtown where there had been a suicide. "If you don't, I will be forced to restrain you for your own protection. I know this is a tough time for you and I don't want to have to cuff you. Please don't make me do that."

"I want you to take deep breaths now, William," said the counselor preparing a syringe.

"I shouldn't have looked away!" he shrieked.

"Come on and take the pills," Joe told him over the sound of Mary crying. "You're coming apart. You did nothing wrong. We're here and she's going to be found."

The eyes of William's crazed mind had contorted all those around him, their faces inhuman and mocking, the faces of monsters who lied when they said that people were looking for Kirsten, monsters who only wished for him to stay and wait or take some pills, who might soon inject something to make him sleep, yes *sleep*, while his daughter was out there somewhere dying of exposure, dying at the mercy of wild animals, dying at

the hands of some madman inflicting god-only-knew-what kind of torture, crying, dying, screaming, dying...

Joe put a hand on William's shoulder and leaned in. "She is going to be found. It'll be all right. She's a smart girl. She *will* be found."

But his sodden eyes said, *She's never going to be found. She's gone and it's your fault because you took your eyes off her. I lost my only child and now I've lost my only grandchild, and I will be here to remind you every day that IT'S YOUR FAULT. I won't ever let you forget. You did this. YOU DID.*

A needle went into his arm.

Once the tranquilizers took hold, he had no choice but to calm down. As he faded, he no longer struggled, but he did cry.

Even in drugged sleep.

E L E V E N

CONNECTIONS

1

Tom Beamish had been dead before Chad Hyman dialed 911 and long before the first cop came on the scene. The time between must have only been a few minutes, but they were very *long* minutes. They were eternities while Chad did the only thing that occurred to him in the haze of cold shock to do. He did CPR. Heroically, Chad Hyman did CPR on a man who had stuck a barrel in his mouth and blew off the back of his head in a burst of blood and brains that clung to the wall. Heroically, Chad did CPR knowing full well he was botching it up and eyes do not normally bug out of the sockets the way they do in cartoons.

What had failed to register in the craziness of what he hoped was a bad dream was that his efforts were for nothing. Someone could have ripped off Tom's skin, broken his bones in alphabetical order, and dropped him from a high-rise building into a vat of piranhas, and he wouldn't have cared. In his underwear was the last shit Tom Beamish would ever give.

He was gone. It had all happened so fast, so ridiculously fast. Introductions, discussion, attempted murder, suicide, and CPR on a corpse with a skull crater.

The five for one special. Limited time only.

Hours later, while he sat beside Paul Kemp's desk in the Sutton Valley police station, Chad tried to shake off the feelings of unreality, doubts that any of it could have happened.

He did not wonder why Paul had him give a second statement, why Deputy Castillo from the Vineyard County Sheriff's Office had stared dubiously while he gave that statement, why they asked him to stick around, or why both Paul and Castillo kept coming and going. He had no idea that the gory scene he left on Oates Road wasn't the only reason the station was in a bustle, though he would have known had his mind processed any of the radio chatter or discussions going on around him.

His attention was fixed on the mess in his head that he tried to make sense of.

A voice seemed to come from a great distance, its words lost, and then from closer. "Chad, the deputy wishes..." Closer. "Chad?" Closer. "*Chad.*"

His ears tuned in the outside world just in time for a whistle to rip through them.

Chad looked sharply to the doorway where Paul leaned, fingers still in his mouth under his mustache.

"Sorry." Chad rose. "I'm here."

Paul let his hand drop and tried on a smile that didn't fit. "The deputy has some questions. In the conference room." He blocked the door when Chad tried to pass. "Because you and I are friends..." He lowered his voice. "Whatever he says in there, don't take offense."

Chad looked at him sidelong. "Am I going to?"

He hesitated. "You might."

Based on this warning, Chad suspected Castillo had some wrong ideas about what happened, not to mention would be upset if he knew the local cop had just undermined whatever session he had planned by giving it advance billing.

"Oh boy," Chad muttered.

They entered the conference room where Castillo stood grimly at the table in his blue-black uniform. Once his eyes rose from the files that lay open on the table, they met Chad's

and would seldom leave them.

His face rugged, skin dark, and eyes black, Castillo watched Chad the way a cat watches prey.

"Have a seat, Mister Hyman," he said without the Mexican accent Chad expected.

"I've had my fill of sitting."

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting." Castillo didn't sound it. "I was present during the statement you gave in this room two hours ago."

Chad didn't care for Castillo already. "I saw you."

Staring at me as if I was a bug under a microscope.

"I've reviewed that statement several times now and there are some hazy areas I hope you would clear up."

"Anything I can do to help."

"I appreciate your cooperation," Castillo said, his tone dry. "You stated you never met Mister Beamish before today. What's not clear to me is why you sought this man out at his home. You stated it was work-related, but not in what capacity other than you work for a previous employer."

Chad treaded the subject carefully. "I had some questions about a clean-up job he did some years ago up on Saybrook."

Castillo crossed his arms, pausing. "Saybrook?"

"Ayup. Saybrook Road. Where a house burned down years ago. The old Hoad place."

Chad thought of the weeds in the clearing and how Tom had told him that they had grown unnaturally high.

(It was as if...)

(Nature was trying to hide what was left.)

"I'm aware of the site." Castillo exchanged a grave glance with Paul. "Up by thirty-two."

"That's right," Chad said with a slight edge. "Am I missing something here?"

"Any idea why Mister Beamish started shooting at you?"

"Yes. He was a lunatic."

(They told me what I gotta do so that devil won't get me and I ain't gon' be no beef in the devil's stew.)

"Is that your official prognosis as a plumber?"

"Sir..." Chad scowled. "I do more than plumbing."

"Tell me, Hyman. Did Tom have any reason to feel threatened?"

"Apparently. But not by me. By *them*."

"Them?"

"Them," Chad confirmed. "He kept talking about *them*. They this. They that. Voices in his mind. Who knows. You wouldn't have had to be a shrink to judge he wasn't right in the head. Plain to see. He was off his meds. No doubt."

"You barely knew him yet you knew he was supposed to be on medication."

"I saw the pills."

Castillo leaned on the table. "And you go through the medicine cabinets of people you've only just met."

Paul lowered his head, cleared his throat.

Somehow Chad kept his cool, but he heard the edge in his voice sharpening. "I saw the pills in the bathroom off the kitchen and the cabinet didn't have a door. Nothing had a door in that house in case you didn't notice, Deputy."

"Can you shed any light on that?"

Chad thought of Tom's missing fridge, the duct-tape that held the oven door closed, Tom's words about how Richard Winslow had gotten rid of all his appliances, and about the book Tom found crammed in a toaster, a book by Hoad.

There was pages marked, Tom Beamish had said. And pages where Richie Winslow drew lines under things like schoolkids do.

Maybe Tom had kept that book and whatever had been underlined inspired him to do the things he did just as it had inspired Richard Winslow.

Chad considered sharing this, then changed his mind.

"Frankly, no."

"We believe it's related to his condition. We're waiting on the paperwork from the institution where he spent some time."

"I believe you answered your own question."

Not to mention dropped the ball.

Their voices rose and quickened.

"Am I upsetting you, Hyman?"

"You are." Chad didn't like how Castillo had dropped the Mister, knowing cops tended to call suspects and prisoners by their last names only. "If you wanna accuse me of something, just do it."

"We're having difficulty locating any relatives of Mister Beamish," Castillo went on, as if Chad had said nothing.

"Might you be able to help us with that?"

"No. I did *not* know him before today."

"And today he's dead."

"You don't need to tell me. I was there."

"*Yes, you were.*" Castillo exhaled hard through his nose.

"You've had quite the run of bad luck this year."

"Pardon?" Chad tried not to scowl when the deputy repeated the sentence. "How's that?"

"Abigail Arnell. You found her deceased at a residence here in town. On Saybrook."

Chad tensed inside. His mind called up the memory of Abby decomposing on her floor, then of Tom freshly dead in a suicide sprawl. He thought of the framed pictures that had been shattered, assaulted, knocked off Abby's walls. He thought of the nails sticking out of Tom's that probably once held pictures. Abby's smashed television, Tom's TV stand with no TV, the dusty space where Tom's fridge should have been, the freezer in the weedy gloom, Tom declaring *I saw the devil inside it!*, a flash of the freezer on the back of Art's truck and

Chris Purvis inside of it, his dead eyes staring from a broken body, Tom's missing doors, the nightmare when the door of the freezer swung open with an explosion of blood and bones and entrails, and Tom's faded welcome mat that now read *we come*, WE COME, all those thoughts tumbled down in a crazy avalanche.

"Hyman?" Castillo asked.

"Yes," Chad said wanly. "Me and my partner Pengsy found it. Her. Last year, yes."

"Seven months ago."

"Something like that."

"Not long before that, a missing persons file was opened on a co-worker of yours named Daniel Rothman."

"Danny. Nobody called him Daniel. And he wasn't just my work partner. He was my friend."

"Curious choice of words."

"What did I say?"

"The Rothman case is still open. If you didn't know. Would *you* characterize his disappearance as suspicious?"

"As a matter of fact, I would," Chad said.

"Imagine my surprise when I read the reports and found that Miss Arnell was the last one to see Mister Rothman. That is, other than you."

"That's correct."

"Last seen at that same residence where Miss Arnell was found dead."

"Abby did live there, sir."

"You must admit that it's an interesting coincidence." Castillo lifted a brow when Chad said nothing. "Now you're telling me that you went to talk to Mister Beamish about something related to the same property."

"The property beside it. But close enough."

"Is it not true that you were parked there this morning?"

Chad wondered how he knew and why it mattered. "No."

"You say you weren't?"

"You asked if was not true. No, it's not *not true*. It is true. You're gonna have to pardon me for listenin' to what you say too carefully when you keep throwing out trick questions."

"A witness spotted you on the site at approximately seven-thirty. What were you doing there?"

"Looking at the property to see if there was anything else out there that I might have missed," Chad said, which was not entirely a lie. "Junk keeps turning up there that I have to remove from time to time when the tenant complains."

"The tenant being William Dudley. What is your relationship with him and his daughter?"

Chad shifted in his seat. "I showed him the house before he signed the rental papers." He glanced at Paul, who wasn't giving support the one time Chad truly needed it. "And when something needs to be fixed or done on the property, I come to do it. Same as when Abby lived there. That's my job. What the hell are you drivin' at?"

"Don't you know?" Castillo leaned in farther, head thrust between his shoulders. "The Dudley girl is *missing*."

Stunned, Chad lost his breath and his jaw went limp.

A silence passed and Castillo only watched him.

"When did she disappear?" Chad heard himself ask, his voice almost inaudible. "Around the time I was there?"

"Later in the morning." Castillo pushed himself back to a stand. "I needn't check out your whereabouts at the time because I already know. As does Officer Kemp, four other officers from my department, emergency technicians."

"Right."

"Your alibi is so rock-solid and convenient that it's enough to make me speculate given everything else I know," Castillo said. "There's been too many incidents with your name popping up. I can accept bad luck. Wrong place, wrong

time. I can accept coincidences, except when they come in groups. There's too many. Now is there something here you'd care to let me in on? Maybe the real reason you paid Tom Beamish a visit."

"I told you. I was curious about--"

"I can relate with curiosity. Something stinks here, Hyman, and I'm pretty damned curious how you could think that nobody would smell it."

Chad rose. "I've had enough. It's time for me to walk."

"Fine. One more question before I cut you loose."

"You'll have to either way unless you're gonna arrest me. Unless what I see on TV isn't true."

"Let's say you *were* there this morning by happenstance," Castillo said, his tone too sarcastic to be an indication of his position softening. "Your timing might have been good to have witnessed something. Anything you might recall that was out of place could be of help."

Chad thought back, then shook his head. "Only thing out of place there was me. That I saw." He turned away and walked. "You asked your question."

"What would you expect me to think, Hyman?" Castillo said behind him. "Put yourself in my shoes and tell me you wouldn't be suspicious. Tell me you wouldn't pursue it."

Chad stopped and looked over his shoulder. "If I were you. And you were me. I'd be suspicious as all hell and I'd try to rattle you just as hard. But that wouldn't make me right. And even if you knew that I was just doin' my job, it wouldn't make you resent me any less."

Castillo nodded, deadpan but silent for a change.

"Good luck with your investigation. I hope you find the little girl soon."

Shoving four sticks of gum in his mouth one after another, Chad walked out to his jeep and hit the road again.

He didn't go back to work or home.

2

The "historic" Sutton Valley Library was among the oldest structures in the county. Ivy climbing the worn brickwork of the sides that faced town, it hugged a steep incline above the rooftops of the commercial district. Camouflaged on the hill rather than standing out as it did in pictures from the roaring twenties, it was easy to miss if you didn't know it was there. Only then might the eyes pull it out of the landscape and appreciate how big the place really was. Figuring out how to get there was the next trick. The only sign for the library was faded at the weed-choked mouth of a side street, which led up alongside the lot and entrance and then snaked on up the hill to nowhere else in particular. Public library or not, historic or trivial, Chad doubted it got many visitors.

Some called the building spooky and Chad had to take their word for it. A Hammer Man he was. A Library Man he was not. He hadn't gone to one since his first and last visit to the Reed Library on the SUNY Fredonia campus, and that was over fifteen years ago.

Surprised at the number of cars, Chad parked and stepped out. He watched a small crew work on the stone masonry while concrete dust blew around on the would-be majestic steps that were crumbling with age on one side, not yet renovated. Once he had a good look at the building, he found he disagreed with the spooky consensus. To Chad, it looked harmless and sad, like a tired old man who wanted to die but no one would let him.

A jangling tone rang out as Chad opened the door. Past a bin of bargain books for a buck a piece, past the columns of the entry hall and a corkboard dotted with notices and identical

pink flyers titled with the big black lettering *SUPPORT THE VALLEY LIBRARY* over *PRESERVE OUR HERITAGE*, Chad walked through an arch into the main room.

The carpet beneath him faded but surely once considered plush, Chad stopped and his gaze rose.

Dangling in the drafts of the old library, cobwebbed chandeliers reached down from the beams of the cathedral ceiling. The skylights were aglow. Dust swam in the spread of cool light that spilled from them and shafted down the long aisles in the background from casement windows at least fifteen feet high.

Chad took a good look around, saw readers at work tables, people navigating the library as if they knew where they were going. He didn't know where to start.

The man at the cluttered island of the circulation desk looked up from a book he was reading. Under the gleam of his shaved head, he peered over the rim of his reading glasses.

"Can I help you, sir?" the man asked, his tone warmer than expected. "You look lost."

Chad supposed he did. "I'm looking for a book."

"Then you've come to the right place." He rose and came to the counter. "Are you looking for something related to... your trade perhaps?"

The studious way the man looked at him made Chad nervous. "No. Not at all."

"I'm going to presume you don't have a card."

"Business card?"

The man blinked and smiled, ever patient. "Library."

"Oh, no." Chad glanced around, feeling idiotic and a trifle regretful for coming. "Not sure I'll find what I'm looking for. If I do, I hoped you'd fix me up with one."

"I think I could be persuaded. What type of book would you be interested in today?"

Chad bit his lip, hesitating. He felt strangely like a

teenager afraid to ask for a nudie magazine. Ed Hoad was a dark name in that town and Chad didn't know what he was really asking for, much less what reaction it would bring. Unsure if a Hoad book would even be in a public library, Chad didn't want to look like a fool.

If he could have gotten away with it, he would have returned to Tom Beamish's house to look for the book that he spoke of and might have kept. That wasn't an option.

"Stories." Chad knew that much. "Fiction. Nothing in particular. I just wanna look. If you'd be kind enough to point me in the right direction, I'd..." He gave a nod when the man pointed behind him. "Much obliged."

He chose an aisle, found himself in the E's, and searched for the H's, surprised along the way at how much ground there was between. All those books. All those names. He wondered if there could be that many people with something worthwhile to say, and doubted it.

Along the wall at the aisle ends, Chad saw paintings hung between windows with plaques stating who had donated them. Portraits, landscapes, objects. If there was anything special about the paintings, he couldn't tell. They were no more distinct to him than paintings he had seen in curbside junk piles, but they reminded him of the thing that hung always in the back of his mind.

He thought of his college art class and that painting of The Fates he had been taken with, especially Atropos with her scissors that cut the threads of life.

This was why, as he neared the end of an aisle and the middle of the H's, he startled when he heard a voice say:

"Scissor-hand."

He looked around sharply.

The aisle was empty.

"Mister Scissor-hand."

His gaze fell on a painting of a medieval ship sailing at night on a stormy sea, as it began to move on the canvas. Waves slapped against the hull of the ship while it pitched and the sails fluttered.

Heart pounding, he approached it.

A figure appeared on deck, then another, and another, until there was five, all the passengers who died at the business end of a train in Sumner Bay in 1988. Finally the driver appeared. Long hair, leather jacket, a pair of scissors in hand, Chris Purvis spit a cigarette overboard.

"Your ship's gonna come in soon if you don't let this go," Purvis said, while a scream tried to wriggle its way out of Chad. "That's fine with us." (Sir?) "We've been waiting for you." His dead eyes staring from sunken holes, he opened and closed the scissors. "Deadsville's been waiting for *you*."

Something touched Chad's shoulder and a cry leaped out of him as he spun and recoiled. His back slammed against the shelves and books tumbled down.

The librarian looked stunned. "My goodness," he said. "I frightened you."

Chad jerked his eyes toward the painting, which was just as it should have been.

Inanimate. Paint on canvas.

He heard the man say, "I did try to get your attention."

"I'm sure you did." Chad looked at the plaque under the painting which read

DONATED BY H.C. BOGGS

and then at him. "I've been jumpy lately."

"It would appear so. How else could a little thing like me startle a big man like you?" The man smiled. "I only wished to ask if you needed any help in your quest for a book. You don't have any author in mind, you said."

"Ed Hoad," he heard himself say, no longer caring, and he glanced at the painting again warily.

What the hell is going on?

"The writer's name is Ed Hoad," he repeated, pale.

"Ah." Looking more puzzled than anything else, the librarian turned and scanned. "You were doing fine on your lonesome." He plucked a book from the shelf and handed it to him. "Here we have one and..." His hand and eyes wandered. "Hmm."

Chad looked at the cover, which was black, and then at the spine which had gold lettering. Across the top was *Hoad*, and down the length:

THE JASMANGLERS

"I was sure there were at least two others," he said. "If they're out, I could tell you when they'll be back in and hold them for you. Would you like me to do that?"

"Why not." Chad followed him back to the desk, where he typed at a computer terminal.

"If you'll pardon me for saying so..." The man didn't look up. "You didn't strike me as the type to get into Hoad."

Chad wondered if he should be offended. Then again, he wasn't wrong. He didn't get into any book. "Are you?"

"Not particularly, but Donald thinks highly of his work. Donald Prater is our head librarian. He goes on and on. If he were here, I'm sure he would have his hooks in you already."

Chad skimmed the first page of the story and then started flipping through the pages.

Dense text. Big words.

Oh lordy, that looks like work.

"The Trolls in the Gloom and Others is marked as lost," the man said. "Stolen is more probably the case. People tend

to walk off with cult classics for reasons I'll never understand. We have trouble keeping Lovecraft on the shelf too."

"Cult." Chad didn't like the sound of that word.

"And *The Gibgoblins* is months overdue, which probably means that we won't see that again either, I'm afraid."

Chad blinked. "What was that?"

"I said the book is long overdue and--"

"Before that. The what?"

"The Gibgoblins. The title."

Didn't Beamish say that word? Chad asked himself. *Yes, he stumbled over it at first, but finally got it out in the end. Last thing he said before...*

(Gibgoblins ain't gon' gobble me up!)

All bets on that being the book I need.

"Do you know when you'll get new copies in?"

The man shook his head wistfully.

"This one will do me fine. What do you need?"

Once the librarian had Chad squared away and he had a library card in his wallet, a monumental event to say the least, he thanked him and started for the entrance. He glanced in the book again, flipping pages, and stopped.

Hesitating, he returned to the desk.

"Sir?"

"My name is Phil."

"Okay, Phil. How might I get in touch with this Donald. The head library person. Will he be in tomorrow?"

"He's attending a convention and I don't know when he'll return to us in the flesh. He checks in daily by phone."

"Can I leave him a message?"

"Certainly." Phil produced a notepad and pencil.

And Chad wrote.

3

Night fell.

Chad finished his dinner that he had warmed up in the microwave. He had come home late again from work, which he was trying to wind down from. Caroline was up to her usual teenage antics. She played her music too loud, hogged the telephone line, and had locked her bedroom door despite Chad's threat to take it off the hinges. Buck was throwing a temper tantrum, his whines of protest growing louder in his bedroom where he played a video game that Chad wished came with an Always-Let-The-Player-Win mode. Trish was in the master bedroom, looking tense. Reading a book on the bed in her pajamas, she took sips from a glass of water, which she set on the end-table beside an ibuprofen container that would open again soon.

It was a typical night in the Hyman house.

Up to that point.

"What book is it tonight?" Chad asked Trish from the bedroom doorway, where he held *The Jasmanglers* at his side, out of sight.

She didn't look up. "Hmm?"

"When do you think you'll finish that book?"

"Dunno. Few days." She snorted. "How come you ask me about stuff we both know you don't care about?" Looking up, she lifted a brow. "Are you trying to take interest in your wife again, Mister Hyman?"

"Maybe."

"There are better ways," she said with a wink.

"I could use a little of that."

Chad tried to smile. It was hard after the day he had, which he wanted to tell her about but wouldn't. Though she

wasn't one to watch the news or read the paper, she had friends that did. It was only a matter of time before she found out, and he hoped no one else beat him to the punch. But he couldn't do it now. It would have meant explaining *why* he went to see Beamish in the first place. He needed to know more and make some kind of sense of it first.

"I wish we could." Trish scowled.

"It's that time?"

She groaned.

"So we wait." Finally he walked in, taking the book into both hands. "Once you're done with that. Will you do me a favor and have a look at this one?"

Trish looked mystified, her eyes moving from Chad to the book. "What is it?"

"A book. Fiction. Like you read." Chad sighed. "Would you read it and tell me what it's about?"

She reached and he gave it to her. "Why not read it yourself?"

Several answers came to mind, but out came the one he ranked most important: "I don't have a lot of time to wrangle with it. By the time I find my way around it, it may be too late. You could fly through this and tell me what I need to know a helluva lot faster. When there's a task to be done, it's always best that you bring it to someone with experience is all."

She rolled her eyes. "This is a book not a..." Her voice stopped when she looked at the title page. "Ed Hoad. Why is that name familiar?"

Chad reckoned giving her the answer could only help his cause, as she would be intrigued. "He used to live in Sutton Valley. Him and his family vanished. They say he killed them."

"Oh." Her eyes filled with recognition. "Okay. I think I remember." She knew. There was no doubt. "But why do you

want to..." Befuddled, she shook her head. "You said you can't take too long. Why? I don't understand."

"I don't either." Chad rummaged through his dresser for clothes to put on after his nightly shower. "I don't want to get into all of it."

She went rigid, alarmed. "All of what?"

A silence passed.

"Tell me."

"I have no facts to give. You know how I am about getting my facts straight."

"Chad, don't keep secrets."

"Right now all I've got is stuff right out of the damned Twilight Zone. It'd make you think I flipped my lid. You know me and you know I wouldn't say a thing like that lightly."

Interest filled her eyes and something else that Chad could only equate to a kind of shock. "No, you wouldn't."

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

"My instincts are all I've got," Chad said gravely. "They tell me somethin' in that book might be important. It could help stop a bad thing."

Her eyes met his. "How bad?"

"I don't know yet. But I feel like I'm running out of time."

4

On the second day of Kirsten Dudley's disappearance, Chad paid another visit to the Lemstrom scrap yard with Pengsy after work. The freezer was *gone*. Neither Reggie nor Fred had any memory of them bringing it down. Pengsy was speechless and pale, probably as pale Chad was as he drove to the Saybrook property.

By the time they got there, Pengsy looked ready to

explode. "I told you not to involve me in this shit. You're out of your fuckin' mind."

"You gonna say you don't remember the freezer?"

"What freezer?" The edge in his voice said he knew.

Chad rolled slowly past the cars parked on the cul-de-sac, saw Paul Kemp, and shifted the jeep to PARK as Paul approached.

I shouldn't be here, Chad thought. It doesn't look good when I'm probably their only suspect.

But it was too late. He was there.

Chad in the driver seat and Paul leaning his burly body with his elbows on the door, they talked for a while as if they had just bumped into each other, as if there wasn't a little girl missing, a man dead from suicide, and a Sheriff's Deputy wasn't out to hang a fellow named Chad Hyman. They talked about the cut-backs at the PD. About Chad and the family. Paul and his. About Kirsten Dudley too.

All the while, Chad studied the clearing.

"The father's not taking it well." Paul sighed. "I suppose I wouldn't be either."

"No leads?"

"Not one. We've searched the woods twice over."

Pengsy opened his mouth as if he might contribute, but said nothing. He lit a cigarette and stared down the hill.

Chad scratched at his scruff. "Did anybody you had out here come across an old freezer?"

Paul blinked. "Someone did mention that. Said they bumped into the thing, over there someplace." He gestured. "Someone else saw it too, but they must have been seeing things. I checked it out myself. Nothing there. Why?"

It's still there, Chad thought grimly. It's just hiding from me. Hiding from my eyes the way it hid from my mind.

"Mister Didley complained about one that had been sitting out there." Chad burned a hole through the tree-line

with his gaze. "Remember how I said junk keeps turning up up here. I came to have a look."

"Like I said--"

"There's nothing there. I got it."

"If it was, it disappeared," Paul said, an odd choice of words. "Like a lot of things on this hill. I get the creeps thinking about the Winslow house that was here."

"How Rich Winslow vanished."

"The Hoad family before that. Roy Morgan."

"Roy?"

"Betty's husband. I guess he don't count, as he walked out on her. Nobody's ever heard from him though. It's enough to make me wonder."

"Don't forget Danny. Up here is where I last saw him."

Paul looked a trifle pale. "Right."

Now that girl, Chad thought. I think she counts. They all count. That's too much coincidence. And what do you know, there's one more. There's an old freezer out here that has Scotty beam it back whenever it's taken away, and it's from the Winslow place, probably one leftover from when it was the Hoad's. There's something unnatural about that thing every bit as much as people doing vanishing acts.

"I reckon we shouldn't be chummin'," Chad said. "Castillo prolly thinks I had somethin' to do with Roy Morgan disappearin' too, even if I wudn't even born yet."

"Your talk with Castillo went better than you think."

"I doubt that."

He twitched when his cell phone rang.

Paul thumbed at the house. "I'm going to talk to the father. Nice seeing you again, though I wish the circumstances were different."

Chad nodded and answered his phone. It was Trish, who was having another blowout with Caroline. Caroline wanted

permission to go to a rock concert with good old bedroom-eyes Nick, her detention-prone lunkhead of a boyfriend.

"I am at my wit's end!" Trish declared, which signified that his intervention was demanded upon penalty of much grief and sleeping on the sofa.

"I'll be home in twenty." He hung up and felt himself getting keyed up as he backed down the driveway.

Pausing, foot on the brake, he looked at the cape house where William Dudley was living a nightmare he wouldn't wake up from. Chad's problems with Caroline had never seemed so slight. At least she was home. If the Dudley girl was never found, William wouldn't get the luxury of seeing her bloom, much less have to put up with teenage angst and bonehead boyfriends.

"Things aren't so bad, are they?" he asked himself.

"What?" Pengsy had been so quiet that Chad forgot he was still there.

"Nothing."

Chad set his eyes on the clearing and thought, *I'll be back for you.*

(Unless you forget again...)

He backed out and hit the road to take Pengsy home.

Looking tense, wary, the white of his eyes as red as open sores, Pengsy said nothing on the way there, but Chad had too much on his mind to feel awkward about it.

When Chad pulled up, he spotted an unfamiliar sedan in the driveway and then caught a glimpse of Jill in a front window before she closed the drapes.

"Tell Jill I said hi." He flinched when Pengsy snapped his face toward him. "Okay, don't."

"We've been talkin' lately," Pengsy said, sounding defensive. Then he snickered. "She had a breakup and comes to me to lean on. Ain't it funny how life goes?"

"There ain't anything wrong with that." Whether it was

the best thing, Chad couldn't decide, given their history.

"Even so, I'm surprised you're getting along. You *are* getting along?"

Pengsy got out. Before he closed the door, he said, "As well as can be expected."

T W E L V E

PENGSY

1

The moaning started around eleven that night.

Pengsy had the top for the first hour until his arms began to feel sore, and then moved the festivities to a higher altitude, up on knees and from behind at an angle that offered a first-rate view in the bedroom mirror for the next event. One hand braced on a shoulder above a rose tattoo and the other wrapped in dark hair soaked with sweat, his right knee up and the left digging into the bed with each thrust, he didn't know how long he kept the machine pumping before his energy flagged and the numbness tingled all the way up to his thighs.

Taking the responsible course of action, he relinquished his active post and let her take the top. From time to time he fingered the buttons he knew were there just inside her back door, setting off chains of interesting noises, playing all the greatest hits and a few new ones to bring him up to speed.

Finally, he simply let her ride.

By two AM he wanted a cigarette, but would wait until she was finished.

It was hot, sticky, Pengsy felt like a piece of meat, Jill was flying her sixth or seventh trip to Neverland, and he enjoyed watching her lift off enough to compensate for being stuck on the ground. The sight of her breasts bouncing as the nipples drew imaginary circles in the air. The feel of her wet thigh-highs slipping against his hips. Her sporadic conversations with God. There was no shortage of things to keep him engaged.

With a sway and shuddering moan, Jill returned to Earth. "Oh ... oh wow," she said, voice thin, breaths quivering. "I... have missed... this."

"That right?" He smirked up at her, his hands clasped behind his head. "It was hard to tell."

"Mmm." Jill giggled and her eyes yawed and rolled for a moment, as if drugs had kicked in. "But I *did*." She ran her hands up his chest and raked her nails back down, causing him to tense and go as rigid as stone inside her. "Are you... *Oooh*."

His lips pulled back into a grimace as he chuckled through his clamped teeth. "Easy. It still lives."

"I know. Believe me." Another sigh trembled out of her. "Are you ever going to..." Her breath ran out and she pulled in another. "Are you ever gonna--"

"Eh-eh." Pengsy shook his head.

Just like old times.

"God, I want you to," she said. "I feel bad when you don't. I mean it shouldn't be one-sided."

It did leave a tension behind that he had trouble getting rid of, yes, but he thought it best not to bother her with something that neither of them could control. It could have been worse besides.

At least he wasn't impotent.

"It's fine and you give me all I need." Pengsy had always suspected that she secretly took it as a kind of insult too. "You remember how I get. Some things change. Some don't. We could go till the birds are chirpin'. You don't have to stop."

"Don't... tempt me." She grinned, arching a brow.

Pengsy sniggered.

She rose, easing him out of her, and crawled over top him. Dark tresses swung to the sides of her face and her arms trembled under her slight weight as she leaned close. Her

nipples brushed his. Their lips drew close, noses touching. His eyes met hers, looking so deep that it felt as if he was falling into them.

They were unblinking, ferocious, eyes that said *I want to devour you* the way a predator's do. This didn't surprise him as much as what he saw and felt when that fell away to the warmth that lay beneath. He hadn't felt it in so long that it was alien at first. Once he recognized it, it filled him.

He remembered how she had looked at him when she threw him out and how much it hurt. In her eyes there had been no love, only spite. She had looked at him as if he were a bag of garbage. Beneath his red face and the yelling, beneath all his nasty words and threats, his heart had been broken. He was broken and alone in the world.

Pengsy never thought those eyes would look at him again the way they were now.

Not ever again.

"I love you." The words flew out, causing a flash in her eyes that was startled and wary, and he shut his mouth with regret. He closed his eyes and breathed out his nose. "I shouldn't uh..."

Her fingers landed on his lips.

He opened his eyes, blinked them, rolled them to hers.

Pausing, her face was deadpan, but her eyes intense.

"This is the man I married," she whispered, and a tear rolled down her cheek before she snuggled into him, head against his chest.

He wrapped his arms around her, stroking her hair.

"Man you divorced too." He felt her shaking her head against him and her tears mingling with his sweat.

"The man I married made me feel safe," she said, her voice quiet. "He was someone I knew. The man I divorced... was someone I didn't know at all. He made me scared."

A silence passed.

"Is he gone?" she asked.

His fingers ran through her hair unconsciously now as he stared up and held this woman he loved and had wronged in many ways, wishing they could stay where they were now, never having to leave it and continue on through the minefields and dark alleys of life where bad things tended to jump out unexpectedly and people with the best of intentions lost their way.

He wished they could stay in that moment forever.

"It's just me here," he said simply.

Jill tightened her hold.

The corner of his mouth twitched as his gaze wandered to the large mirror that had once been in Abby Arnell's bedroom. He searched the reflection with distrust, afraid he would find a watcher seated in that backwards world inside the mirror.

He didn't see *him*, but that didn't mean he hadn't been there, that *he* hadn't appeared and *watched* as Jill rode him, naked and crying out.

His skin broke out in gooseflesh and he felt sick to this stomach at that possibility that at any moment his dead cousin would step out of the mirror as he had too many times already.

He hadn't been thinking about that when he carried Jill into his bed. It had been the farthest thing from his mind. Now he couldn't believe that he had made love to Jill for the first time in an eternity in sight of that *thing*.

"Only me."

2

They smoked in the living room to the sound of a noisy water filter and the light from the fluorescent bulbs that spanned over the fish tank.

Wearing only boxers, he felt as cold as a corpse, but didn't

mind. The cold was sobering. Fortifying. It kept him alert, on-guard.

Jill wore his robe and, other than the thigh highs, nothing else. This might have occupied his mind every moment they sat there if he hadn't been distracted with other things.

"How come you don't sleep in the bed?" She pulled the ashtray on her lap.

"Hmm?"

She repeated the question.

"Too big without someone to share it with." A bullshit answer, but a good bullshit answer. "How'd you know?"

"The pillows are out here."

He snorted. "Right."

Looking over his shoulder, he thought of the mirror again and dreaded he might see Eric shambling down the hall in his bicycle gear.

Don't come now. Don't you dare come now.

(Don't think about it or he will. He will.)

Pengsy flushed the image from his head, but it was replaced by the thought of a drink and a powerful assurance from a dark place inside that it would relieve the tension he felt on many levels. The fantasy of knocking one back was so comforting that it was jarring. After what just happened with Jill, who let him back into her heart and maybe--just maybe--would let him back into her life, he was ashamed as hell of himself.

"I'm proud of you for quitting drinking," she said, and he almost flinched, feeling as though he had summoned that demon with the guilty thought alone. "I have been for a while." She squeezed his hand. "You did it. You really did it."

"It was the thought of you," he said, which was not really a lie. "Made me wanna be a better man."

"I wanted to be there for you when Eric died."

His eyes darted around at the name.

"I wanted that so much," she went on. "But I was afraid what might happen. Even though everyone told me you were dry. I just... couldn't be sure." Her voice broke up. "You had stopped before and... I just couldn't--"

"I understand. Really I do. I hurt you." He didn't like to think about some of the things he had done in his rages, his paranoid, irrational rages when he had become a devil. That devil could take him over and run amok, possess his body, make him do things that would damage all that he cared about and then leave him to pick up the pieces. "I never meant those things. That just wasn't me."

Her eyes dropped and he rushed to clarify.

"I take responsibility for the things I done." He wrestled with words, pausing. "I meant it wasn't the man I shoulda been. That I wanted to be deep down."

"I wanted to fix you," she said. "You had so much hurt and I wished I could take it away and make it all better. But only you could do it. Only you could fix you. And you did. And I'm glad. I'm proud."

I'm glad you're proud, he thought. But for fuck's sake, stop talking about it. Please.

He smiled and brought an arm around her.

While they embraced, he looked warily over her shoulder toward the hall.

"It was for the best," she said. "For both of us. Whether that meant we had to be together or apart, I wanted what was best. I wasn't happy. You weren't happy."

"I kept things caged. I let it all build until my insides were all stretched out and couldn't hold it no more."

"Remember. You can tell me anything. You don't have to bottle anything up with me. Not ever."

I won't, he thought. Except for the fact that I really want a drink right now. I wish I could tell you. Talking to you

always helps, but I can't. It would scare you off. You'd fly out of here like a bird scared from a gunshot.

"Same goes for you." He chained another smoke. "Start now. Tell me about this Douglas character."

She gave a humorless chuckle. "Oh no. We're not going to do that."

"Aw, c'mon."

"You don't really want to know about that."

"Sure I do. I'm interested. I wanna get caught up."

"Caught up?" she said incredulously.

"That's right. So what was he like? Are you thinkin' I'm gonna get all jealous on ya?"

Of course, a part of him was a little jealous, a *little* angry that another man had touched her even if they hadn't been together at the time. Most of that was in the background behind a sadness that he had screwed things up. If he hadn't, *Douglas* wouldn't have happened.

(But he touched her, he touched my lady, he touched...)

Jill sighed and smiled. "He was... stable."

"Right. And?"

"Laid back."

"Boring."

"He wasn't boring."

"How was he in bed?"

Jill opened her mouth in mock outrage. "That's none of your business."

"That bad, huh. Five minute missionary man?"

Jill looked at him from the tops of her eyes, a gesture that told him he was spot-on. "He was studying to be a chemist and--"

"Boring. What else?"

"Do you want to know or not?" She let out a giggle. "Is this one of those male superiority things?"

"Not at all. Go on."

"He liked to golf, listened to Billy Joel, liked opera, was sensitive..."

"Mmm-hmm. Boring."

"Pengsy."

He cocked his head, cracked a smile, and a strangled laugh dragged out of Jill.

"You're right. He was *so* boring."

They laughed.

They kissed and held each other while they finished their cigarettes. They put them out and kissed once more. She pulled back a little, so they were nose to nose.

"He wasn't you," she said, pausing.

"Back to bed with us."

When they returned to the bedroom, Jill settled into the bed and Pengsy hesitated. He needed to do something about that damned mirror.

"Do you have to get up tomorrow?" Jill asked.

"Today don't you mean," he said, and they chuckled.

"Nope. Saturday. Less I get called in. You?"

"Nope."

"Well, all right then."

"Are you coming to bed?"

"One sec." He went to his heap of dirty laundry and pulled from it a sheet that he used to drape the mirror with, hoping Jill didn't ask...

"Why are you doing that?"

"Dunno," he said, pausing as he came up with an answer worth giving. "I don't like the way it catches the streetlights through the window." He reached for the sheet, telling himself he would find a way to ignore it. "It's all right. I'll..."

"No. Leave it."

He looked back at her, relieved but curious.

"I didn't want to say anything because I didn't want you

to make fun of me," she said.

"I wouldn't."

"That mirror creeps me out."

He nodded slowly and looked at it. "Me too."

3

Pengsy woke slowly, stirring and groaning in the heat of late morning. Hair damp with sweat and mouth dry, he rolled over toward the other side of the bed and opened his eyes. What they saw, his waking mind was slow to process.

Pale eyes with tiny black veins stared from the face inches from his own. Rotten lips parted with strings of nameless goo, pulling back from the teeth in a hellish grin. A voice that was barely a voice grated out: *"Was it as good for you as it was--"*

Pengsy's shrill scream tore through the rest as he launched off the bed. His legs tangled in the sheet and he hit the floor hard. Eyes bulging, mouth agape with a scream that ran out of breath and was now no more than a wheeze, he scrambled along the floor and out of the sheet.

He surged up, motioned to bolt, but in front of him--no longer on the bed where it had been lying where Jill should have been--was the living nightmare that had taken the shape of his cousin Eric.

Pengsy revolted from it, staggered back into the wall and knocked over his makeshift end-table. To the floor crashed a lamp, an alarm clock, and an ashtray that spewed its load of butts and ashes in a dirty puff.

Eric watched him, scratched-up arms crossing over his dusty jersey, helmeted head shaking from side to side.

"Pengsy, Pengsy, Pengsy..."

"Don't *do* that shit, man!" Pengsy shouted, his skin flush, eyes enormous, face in a trembling open-mouthed grimace.

"Don't you ever do..." His heart banged in his ears and eyes threw his gaze wildly around. "Where's Jill? What the fuck'd you do!"

"I did nothing."

"Goddamn right you did nothin'!" Pengsy thrust out a pointed hand. "Cuz you ain't real!" He erupted into laughter that didn't sound humorous but insane. "You're dead! *Dead!*"

The corpse in bicycle gear looked unfazed. "You know... where Jill went."

Pengsy shook his head violently.

"My poor cousin Pengsy..." A chill filled the air as he stared with his terrible eyes. They looked inhuman in the daylight, as if they were not eyes at all but terrible, alien things that had crawled into the sockets where they swelled and nested. "Always betraying himself with foolish hopes that lift him high for the next fall. When will he ever learn."

When Eric moved forward, the start of a shriek peeped out of him. He flung himself onto the bed and scrambled to the other side, putting it between them. "You just get your ass back! Don't you come no closer."

"*Or?*"

"Or I'll..." Pengsy blinked and Eric left his sight. "I'll..." He snapped his head to the side, where Eric now stood, and he shrank back against the corner.

"You didn't think she would take you back after all that you have done." Eric advanced. "You've fooled yourself again."

Cornered, Pengsy would have become one with the walls if he could. He considered trying to leap past Eric, but they were too close now. Eric might *touch him* and if that happened, Pengsy had a feeling that he would scream and he would never stop. He would scream forever.

"Jill left because she knew she made a mist-a-a-a-ke. She realized..." Eric drew nearer. "*Realized* what you have to

accept. You were the rebound. To use and *lose*."

"N-No..."

"She left a note about forgotten errands. In the kitchen." Eric leaned and Pengsy shrank while a moan of terror warbled in his throat. "I'll call you later, she wrote."

Eric gave that inhuman smile that made Pengsy's skin crawl, not the smile of a man living or dead but an imitation of one from something that was not a man at all. "*She wrote but she won't.*"

"You lie!"

"And you've been thinking about having a drink."

Pengsy was now, too, crazily certain it would make what was happening easier to deal with. It would take more than one. He would have to get ripped. Ripped good.

Then ... everything would be manageable.

"You know that is not the way. It's running... away." Eric rapped a dirty hand on his helmet. "In here," he said, echoing words he had said many times during Pengsy's first dry weeks. "It's running away."

When Eric reached as if to touch him, Pengsy cried out in repulsion and surged forward to plow Eric down. He passed through him instead with a cold blast through his insides. He tripped, tumbled, and scrambled down the hall.

The thought of running outside came and fell away. He was only in his boxers and Eric would surely be out there too.

Chances were, *he* would be *everywhere*.

Pengsy stormed into the living room, grabbed his cigarettes, lit one up, and hot-boxed it crazily.

"I was always there for you," the dead voice croaked from some distance behind him. "When no one else cared."

"You ain't my cousin." He eyed his collection of knives and daggers on the wall.

"I am your cousin. We are as brothers. I loved you as one and this is how you repay... that love."

A sob found its way out of Pengsy's terror.

"Vengeance. I must have vengeance. I helped you. Why won't you help me."

Reluctantly, Pengsy turned.

Eric stood at the foot of the hall. "You must right the wrong done to me."

"You d-died in an accident."

Eric craned his helmeted head to the right, then to the left, back again, shaking it slowly with mechanical robot-like motion.

"I'll never find rest until you help me," he said, lip curling up over his rotting teeth. *"Until you'll see the truth. But how can you see the truth... when you won't see me."*

Then he was gone.

4

Nine hours passed and they felt like lifetimes. All the while Pengsy trembled, but he did not attribute this to his constant terror of the gruesome ghost of his cousin reappearing. A strong voice inside told him it was the shakes again, the goddamned shakes of withdrawal.

It felt as if he had quit drinking only yesterday and his mind kept busy, damn near turning itself inside out, trying to talk him off the wagon. Spells came and went when all reason shut down and he rummaged through the apartment, through the closets and cupboards in the desperate search of stashes that he kept telling himself were long gone while another part of his riled mind insisted there had to be at least one left. He used to leave himself lifelines while drunk, on occasions remembered and those forgotten too. He banked on the latter.

There had to be one somewhere, hidden but waiting, left for himself during one of those black windows of time.

There *had to be*.

What he would do if he found it was hotly debated in his mental chambers by voices which either proclaimed that it was a seek and destroy mission to ensure he did not find it later when he had no shred of sense left... or that he would dispose of it properly, down his gullet, and then forget it ever happened.

He realized those voices were idiot voices after each spell passed, a realization forgotten when the next one arrived and rendered him vulnerable.

Only the thought of Jill had the power to halt him the times he started out the door to drive to a liquor store.

That's not where you're going, said a new voice at the podium inside him. *You're just stir crazy, man. That's all it is. You need to go for a drive. Clear your head.*

Pengsy knew better. He could not trust himself, which was why he had stayed in all day, climbing the walls, waiting for Jill to call, wondering why she hadn't and doing his best to dismiss the explanation Eric had given him.

Around ten o'clock, while he was on the crapper arguing with no one, the phone rang. Pengsy cycloned through the apartment and seized the phone off the coffee table.

"Hello."

His heart that had been alight with hope *filled* with *fire* when a voice said: "Hello, Padget. It's your dad."

Pengsy tensed, teeth clamped, hand tightening its grip on the receiver and draining of color. His other problems were gone at once, consumed by the fireball that roared up inside him that everything seemed to be spinning around now.

"Padget?"

He did not speak.

His breath had halted and body was still as a predator ready to strike and kill. His vision sharpened. Pupils dilated and drew out all the light in his dim apartment until it could

have been day. From the silence rose all the sounds around him and the low hum beneath them, the white noise drone of an enemy world whose only wish was to beat him down.

"Hello?"

"I am right here," Pengsy said, his voice slow, cold, dark, a devil's voice. "How many times... do I have to *tell* you... *not* to call me that."

"Okay," the quiet voice on the line said. "Right."

Subtle as his father's patronizing tone might have been to others, it brayed in Pengsy's ears, which the years had turned into sensitive instruments indeed.

That tone was the same the man used when Pengsy was a child and wanted to be called by another name. Any other name. His birth name rang wrong in his ears for as long as he had been able to think and reason. Great great fucking Grandpa might have been a Padget, but Pengsy wasn't. He hated it. He didn't like to write it, say it, or hear it.

It wasn't him.

Since as early as Kindergarten, he asked to be called Patrick instead, which wasn't that far off. He wanted to be free from *Padget*. The frustration that no one would let him came to occupy the deepest seat of his rage.

Hearing it dragged him down to that place in the bowels of his being, a place inside him that was ugly and toxic.

Memories of his parents denying him his harmless wish, teachers refusing to call him by anything but *Padget*, taking points off his quizzes and tests for *misspelling his name*, the laughter of the kids in classes at roll call or when 'Padget Pengsy' was called to the principal's office, the nicknames such as "Faggot Pengsy" or "Padget Panzy", and the cruel kids who threw them around but at their own peril as Pengsy grew older and bitter and harder with the years, all those things and more splashed up like napalm and burned him alive from the

inside out.

All it took was hearing *that name*.

That word boiled his blood.

His father, aunts, uncles...

They *knew*, and they did it anyway.

It was all he asked of any of them now, and they would not allow him that one simple thing without a snicker or sarcasm. That is, when they allowed it at all.

It was insult. Blatant disrespect.

One day Pengsy would disown them for it.

Or make them sorry.

Oh so *very sorry*.

"Patrick was it?" his father said, demonstrating his convenient selective memory when it came to that. "You're going to have to excuse me, son, if--"

"I don't have to do anything," Pengsy said.

Eyes unblinking, they swung their gaze to the wall where blades gleamed.

"What do you want?" he asked.

A pause grew.

"I wondered..." His father cleared his throat. "You know, how you have been."

"You didn't take much interest in me as a kid so why the fuck start now?" Pengsy stared now at one dagger in particular. "Anything else? This is not a good time. I ain't no good at pretendin' tonight."

"Your mother hasn't heard from you in--"

"I've been busy."

His father sighed. "Why are you being ridiculous?"

"You say that whenever I remind you that you were piss poor as a parent. Were always wrapped up in your damn self. Never gave me a thing worth havin'. Never taught me a damn thing except how to hate. Go ahead and hang up now. Don't you call back tonight."

"I'm not going to hang up."

"I am." And Pengsy did.

Hands balled into tight fists, he stomped back into the bathroom, where the urge for a drink greeted him, right where he left it. He stared at the crazed looking man in the mirror and they both let out an angry scream to relieve some of the tension, but it wasn't enough. He needed something to bring him down. He needed something to make him feel good.

He needed *needed* NEEDED *NEEDED*...

If Jill was there, he would have had an outlet and she wouldn't have complained. He would have given her a first class express trip to Neverland that she would never forget.

The fantasy saturated him and he felt a rise.

Almost certain he would be able to achieve a result, he dropped his pants and tended to himself.

Pengsy did it roughly as always.

He did it till he bled.

THIRTEEN

MONSTERS

1

Sunday morning Chad drove to Erie with the kids and Buck bore no resemblance to the monster Trish had to endure when she drove to see her folks last time. Chad stayed long enough for them to get their fill of Buck and for all natural conversation to cease--short on both counts. When he left, Caroline did not say good-bye. She had retreated to the guest bedroom where she would sleep for the next week. It was unlike her to volunteer to visit with Grandma and Grandpa Garen for so long, but it must have ranked better than staying home and going nowhere.

She had been grounded for trying to sneak out of the house at 2 AM when she thought everyone would be sleeping ... and thought wrong, as Chad hadn't been doing so well in that department. Chad thought allowing her to go to her grandparents sent the wrong message, as grounded should have meant *grounded*, but Trish wanted her out of her hair.

Her tolerance for Caroline's whining was next to none after spending the weekend on the couch with a stomach bug.

When Chad returned, Trish was dead asleep and he took Buck outside to play so as not to wake her. For dinner, Chad took him to McDonald's where he could eat and burn up some energy on the playground. While Chad watched him, he thought of Kirsten Dudley who hadn't turned up and possibly never would. He was sorry that she was missing but thankful as hell that his kid wasn't. He knew it could just as easily have been Buck. Bad things happen to all kinds of people, and

they're not always people you don't know. Sometimes they're even you. Chad didn't know how he would ever cope with it if it happened to him. He couldn't imagine what William Dudley was going through.

As for Kirsten, he didn't like to think about where she might be now. Speculating tended to conjure the image of a little girl dead in the black crusty tomb of an old freezer, the rotten house of something horrible that he had come to sense on some weird level but not understand.

Then the trembling would start.

It was best not to think of it when he didn't have to.

Chad watched his child play and laugh.

So young. Innocent.

Now wasn't the time.

When they returned home, Trish was snoring on the couch as before, though there were signs she had been up. He took Buck upstairs and played video games with him until bed-time. He could tell Buck was tired by then, but not so tired that he had forgotten about...

"The monsters, Daddy," Buck said, rising off his pillows onto his elbows, staring at the closet.

Chad sighed. "You know, buddy. There really isn't such a thing as monsters. They're not real. They're in your imagination, like dreams are in your imagination."

Buck shook his head. "No. They're in there." His voice cracked, a sign that he might start crying and get riled. If that happened, he wouldn't fall asleep as soon as Chad hoped. He would have to be wound down.

Get it over with and do what you do every night, a voice inside told him. *This ain't a good time for the there's-no-such-thing-as-monsters bit. Just who are you trying to convince anyway? Him or you?*

"All right," he said, and went to the closet.

The ritual commenced. He peeked into the closet and said *they* were there, unable to stop himself from drawing lines to Tom Beamish's babbling.

(They always come. They told me you were comin' too.)

Chad proclaimed that Buck's monsters were in big trouble and then backed into the closet, closing the door.

"You thought you could hide from me," he said to the darkness, which seemed less harmless lately with each passing night. "You were dead wrong and now I'm gonna getcha." Bumping the door and walls and rattling toys, he stirred up some noise and continued on with the same spiel. "Go back to monster-land." A play-phone chimed. "Don't come back or I'll..."

The memory rose of being woken up at 3 AM by his cell and answering the call made from Danny Rothman's phone. He remembered hearing a congregation of whisperers, the wet sucking sounds, and that final sound before the call ended, the rusty croak and clap of what could have been...

The freezer door.

Chad suddenly didn't want to be in that closet.

He did *not* want to be in that pitch black.

(I ain't gon' be gobbled up. Gibgoblins ain't gon--)

"Eat you up." His voice drained of all authority. "Fry you with french fries... dip you in ketchup..." He gulped a breath in the darkness. "And eat you up."

Once the ritual was done, Chad opened the door and relief came with the light from Buck's night-light.

If I keep going at this rate, I'm gonna need somebody to scare away my monsters too.

He sat beside Buck's bed long after he was asleep, and sent a cagey glance at the closet as he walked out.

He returned to the silence of the downstairs and assumed Trish was still asleep, but found her in the kitchen. Clad in a robe and cotton pajamas, her hair in a bed-head tangle, she

sat at the table with a cup of tea and a black hardcover book.

In gold letters, *THE JASMANGLERS* gleamed on the spine.

"You're up." He grabbed his cell phone off the counter and plugged in the charger. "How are you feeling?"

"Better than earlier."

"You don't have to read that now if you're not up to it. It can wait."

"What happened to that feeling of running out of time?"

Chad considered and sighed. "Nothing I guess."

"I thought I better after... you know. After all that stuff you told me."

He doubted it had been such a good idea to let Trish in on that *stuff*, which was pretty much everything starting with the reappearing and disappearing freezer and ending with Tom Beamish blowing his brains out. She hadn't let him alone about it, working him at every opportunity, and he had caved in to make it stop. Trish had looked at him differently after. For better or worse, he couldn't tell.

If he had been in Trish's shoes, he would have recommended a visit to a psychiatrist to himself.

"What's it about so far? Where you're at."

"I've already finished it," she said, not looking away from the page. "I read the ending when I was sleepy and I'm reading it over again."

"Oh." Chad's gaze fell on the ashtray with a freshly butted cigarette and he excavated his pockets for gum. "There don't happen to be anything called a gib-goblin in that book?"

"There's a lot of strange names for things, but not that one I don't think." Trish turned to the last page and closed it. "This isn't the kind of book I would have read. But my husband gave me an assignment." She smirked faintly on that note. "Otherwise I would have stopped after the first

chapters."

Chad wasn't surprised. "Was it that sick?"

"Not that exactly. I found the story hard to follow. When I could find it under all the big words and the rambling. I had trouble with it."

"Not as much as I would have I bet." Chad sat down and averted his eyes when Trish lit another cigarette. "Tell me the highlights. Sum it up."

"Sum it up," she said dubiously, raising her brows.

"Mmm-wow. Okay. I don't know where to start."

"Try the beginning and run me through it from there."

"All of it?"

"I did say run."

"It takes place in a town called Halmer Creek. The descriptions remind me a lot of Barksdale, maybe a little Sutton Valley."

Chad drew circles in the air with a finger. "Run, run."

"There's this Detective Tarding who's investigating some strange murders and people sighting things. Creatures and bogeymen and all that. Tarding figures out that everything is happening in a certain area of the town, you know, and right in the middle of it is the mansion of this eccentric rich-type guy named John Reuben. Hardly anyone has ever seen him and those who have think he's crazy. All anyone sees is his hired help, who all live there at the mansion. None of them are from town. People see them when they go out to buy--"

"Get to the jas-manglers part."

"I'm trying. Will you just let me--"

"Kay. Sorry."

"Well, nobody's seen the help in weeks. Tarding goes to see Reuben but he can't get in. The gates are locked. Nobody answers. There's walls around the place."

Chad bit his lip, waiting.

"He tracks down a nephew of Reuben to ask him when

he's talked with him last, and of course the nephew Gordon hasn't in a long time, but he has keys to get in. So Gordon and his friend and his wife, Catherine, who's just this typical screaming and crying machine through the whole story. Makes me sick. I was actually happy when that stupid bitch got her head bit off. It shut her the hell up."

Chad cleared his throat.

Trish narrowed her eyes. "Anyway. They all go in there and the grounds are huge all around the house. Lots of statues and bushes. You know what I mean."

"Mmm-hmm."

"They get inside and they find out what happened to the help. They find their pieces anyway. Total gross-out stuff. And of course none of the phones work. So they all go back out to go to Tarding's car, but they don't make it that far, because all the monsters that were sleeping have been woken up. They smelled blood apparently. Gordon's friend gets picked up by this flying thing, which is like a bear with wings, only it's not a bear, and this other monster is..."

Chad was staring with his lips pursed to one side.

"Okay. They get stuck in the house. They find out the butler is still alive and he's been hiding. Down in the basement, they find all this mad scientist stuff John Reuben was working on. They find what's left of one of his old maids, which he did some really awful sick stuff to."

"Go on."

"He was a failure at the science stuff and then he started playing with magic instead. Dusty books with spells in them. As it turns out that's where all these monsters came from. He summoned them, but then they got out of control."

Chad wondered if Ed Hoad did a little summoning of his own. "And these monsters are the jas-manglers?"

"Nope. The jasmanglers are these other creatures they

read about in one of those magic books. They can act like equalizers and set things right. Do you know what I mean?"

"I..." Chad gave a nod, which became a head shake.

"You can call them to kill the monsters basically. But when you call the jasmanglers, there's always a price." Trish tapped off a fat cigarette ash. "Like your sanity. Did I mention Gordon is a writer?"

"No. But that's okay. I'd prolly still be lost."

"He writes the same stuff as Hoad. Figures, right."

"Uh-huh."

"To conjure these jasmanglers, the person doing it has to be a person with a imagination. A creative person. The book kept calling it *a soul of divine magic*." She rolled her eyes. "It takes a creator to create. But they come in a form based on that person. So it has to be the right kind of imagination or everything goes to hell."

"Which I assume it does."

"Yes. But before that we find out the butler isn't the butler, but one of the monsters that can make itself look human. John Reuben is still alive, but he's gone crazy and tries to stop them from calling the jasmanglers because he says the monsters are his children."

"What happens when these jasmanglers come?"

"They're monsters that kill the other ones, but then they turn on Gordon. Tarding is dead by then. So Gordon calls a second round of these things to kill the first. It keeps going like that and then Gordon's crazy too."

Sighing, Chad didn't see any parallels. He supposed he might only find them in that other book, which he knew nothing about. He had left another message for Donald Prater at the library, but had heard nothing back yet.

"That's how the story ends?" he asked.

"Everybody dies and the monsters start going through the town and killing everybody. It reads like the beginning of the

end of the world." Trish sipped her tea. "Happy?"

"To tell you the truth." Chad rubbed his temples, pausing. "Not really. No."

"Honey..." Trish said, not staring at him as much as studying him. "You don't believe that girl missing has something to do with this writer. With Ed Hoad. Do you? I mean, not really, right?"

"There's been too many disappearances on that hill. I think that freezer has something to do with it, and I think the freezer has something to do with Hoad. Yes." Chad met her eyes, measuring them. "I also think I might be crazy. There's no way of telling that though is there? Cuz crazy people think they're right too, even if they're as wrong as can be. That's what makes 'em crazy to begin with."

Quietly, she said: "When you say stuff like that, it scares me."

"It does me too. Which is why I wish saying it would make it go away." His eyes went astray.

Silent, she smoked.

"It's not gonna go away."

2

William Dudley spent the week following Kirsten's disappearance on the move. He drove around. Incessantly, he used his new cell phone to call home to check messages or called the police, who he sensed at times were as sick of hearing from him as he was of people who asked him *how he felt*. He posted flyers, approached locals, looked desperately for anyone who might have spotted her.

All the while, he saw people going to work and living their lives as always, blindly faithful that the things which happened to other people, other families, could not touch them.

The indifference of the world burrowed under his skin. It was business as usual. He saw fathers holding the hands of their little kids as they walked playgrounds or the sidewalks from where they just stopped for ice cream. Men were out with their smiling wives who were alive and well. The smiles got to him. They mocked him. How dare them. He saw kids playing, laughing, smiling, having fun. They had no right to any of it while his daughter was still missing. They had no right to have appetites or the peace of mind to sleep.

When he slept, it was because his body gave out. He could never do it when he tried.

William had no trouble crying though. He did it many times a day, often until his sobs ran dry. Sometimes when he felt another spell coming on, he wrestled it back, afraid if he started up again, he would never stop. The stars would burn out and he would still be weeping.

He had found the courage to visit Deborah's grave, only to crumple at her stone into a shuddering heap. *"Oh god, I lost her,"* he sobbed. *"I lost our baby."*

Dizzy, sick to his stomach, treading near the deep end, William felt like he was falling through the hole in his heart, that his entire life was blowing down through it, sucking into the darkness that would be his future, a darkness where he would live with ghosts.

Time moved at frightening speed at times and crawled at others, passing the notches on the clock when Kirsten should have been having breakfast, taking baths, watching Nicktoons while Daddy made lunch, eating, playing...

No missed event went unnoticed when he was at the house, where Joe and Mary had been spending a lot of time manning the phone and lending support.

Thankful, he welcomed and encouraged it. He was at his worst when alone and found himself going into Kirsten's room more often then, each time with a flicker of irrational hope

that he might find her playing or sleeping.

The emptiness of that room often left him sitting on the floor indian-style as Kirsten had liked to do, holding her stuffed animals close to him, remembering how it felt to hold her and have her little hand closed around his finger, rocking as he tried to make her materialize by the force of his will and heart, tried to communicate with her as if the words in his mind might reach hers if he only thought them hard enough.

Oh lord please, Kirsten, be all right. Don't be afraid. I'll find you, I'll never stop looking until I find you. And when I have you back, I'll never take my eyes off you again, not ever again, never again...

Night after night, he knew he was torturing himself.

One evening, after Joe left for home, William resisted the urge to enter his daughter's room. He went outside and sat on the steps where not so long ago Mister Ben had watched her playing with her zoo animals.

Taking great gulps of the fresh air which seemed to help, William watched Betty Morgan for a while as she picked up the maggot-riddled remains of the beef and fried chicken she had left along the driveway for the animals--who had been conspicuously absent lately

She discarded the rotten scraps into a garbage can and his gaze stuck on the big black smiley face drawn on the side in magic marker.

Look at me, the garbage can seemed to say. I'm fulla stinky trash and all kinds of nasty critters are scuttling around in my belly, but look at my smile! Just LOOK at my smile. Take a lesson, Mister Didley.

"Dudley," he said under his breath.

When Betty finished, she went into her house without so much as a glance at him, which was unlike her.

A few minutes later she appeared again. She crossed over

into his yard with a plastic glass in hand and solemn expression. He tried to smile, and failed.

Her silver hair frizzed and aslant to the shoulders of her floral patterned dress, the fingers of her rubber gloves poking out from her apron pocket like a nest of strange udders, Betty inclined her head as she drew close.

"I saw you out here again and thought you might be thirsty. *Sooo* I brought you out some lemonade."

He blinked up at her.

Some of that familiar twinkle left her eyes. "It's home-made. Just the way my husband used to like it."

"That's... thoughtful." He took the glass, had no doubt she meant well, and also had no doubt that he was going to totally flip out on this lady if he found a smiley face on that glass as he had on the container of chicken noodle soup she brought him the day before. He turned it in his hand. No smileys.

"It's kind. Thanks."

"Have you heard anything?" She lowered her head, frowning. "I hate to ask as--"

"No, nothing." His voice cracked. "There's been no ransom. No one has seen her."

"I know what you're feeling," Betty said, and he looked at her doubtfully. "My Annie got lost once." The corners of her mouth that had been hooked down in a frown lifted and her eyes twinkled. "But she came back to me. I have faith that your Kirsten will come back to you too. She will, if you believe. If you keep your faith, William."

William nodded sullenly.

"While Annie was gone..." Betty started, and shook her head. "Oh, it's hard. It was hard when Roy left too. How I miss having him in the house."

William sipped the lemonade, which was sickly sweet. "Your husband passed away?"

"He left," she said, her eyes going astray, "and lately I

think he might have, yes. In the end, I know we'll all be together. In the meantime, I live." She pressed her lips together, pausing. "Life isn't about the things we don't have, but making the best of what we do."

William nodded and hoped against becoming an old hermit who lived with loose screws, feeding wildlife and drawing smiley faces on things.

"Things will get better. Just you wait and see." Betty smiled in that wistful and grandmotherly way she had about her. "I don't think you'll have to wait long. I feel it. You and your Kirsten will be together again."

He wanted desperately to believe that and disbelieve the same inner voices that had warned him of the terrible consequences of taking his eyes off her even a moment, voices that couldn't have been more right, and that now told him that she was *dead* and he would not survive without her.

Even if he could, he did not want to.

3

The Last Supper came to life next door just as Betty Morgan came back in from talking to William. She froze, her jaw lowering, eyes going wide. She leaned on her table, hand planted on her leaves-and-cherries tablecloth which slid and almost made her fall.

Gazing at the painting, she saw the pointy-eared apostles prodding and ripping at what lay on a platter: a teddy bear that she recognized as Mister Ben.

She drifted closer, eyes even wider and unblinking, head tilting. "What... is... *this*?"

Stitches ripped.

The eaters yanked out tufts of stuffing, shoved them between their jagged teeth, and chewed grudgingly.

Their eyes glared.

The bearded one at the seat of honor twirled Mister Ben's cottony entrails around his fork, swiped at it with a forked tongue, and shoved it in, chewing hard while a growl ran like a choppy motor in his throat.

Betty gasped and stopped a few steps short of the wall. Her jaw rose, clamping her dentures. Her face tightened, eyes narrowed, hands went to her hips.

"Ohhhhh, you go right ahead and have your hissy fit!"

She swept her face to the side, threw out a hand palm-out, and walked away.

F O U R T E E N

SUSPECTS

1

During a lunch, Chad made his weekly stop to see Nina while Pengsy stayed out in the jeep, smoking and eating drive-thru as if he had been starved for days.

Chad talked with Nina for ten minutes or so while she washed dishes by hand. He offered to fix her broken dishwasher, but Nina declined and said that her boyfriend would have a look at it later that night while she had a get-together with friends. The mention of a support system and of a man in her life pleased Chad, as he thought that's just what she needed. To start over. To move on.

He was glad, but little happiness came with the feeling. It wouldn't be long before that child came into the world, never to know his or her daddy, perhaps would never be told that the man it knew as Daddy by then really wasn't in blood.

The child might never know that a man named Danny Rothman even existed. That's the way life went sometimes.

Chad didn't know how Nina would handle that subject and didn't think it was his business either. He only knew that *he* wouldn't forget about Danny, and felt he owed it to his friend to find out what happened to him.

Why he hadn't lived to see his child.

Are you positive he's dead? he asked himself.

But Chad was. He didn't want to be, but he was.

His present state of not knowing the *how* or the *why* didn't bother him as much as the strong and scary feeling that

he really *was* going to find out.

He was on an unstoppable train already headed for its destination.

(C'mon, Hammer Man. Let's ride.)

The first thing Chad's gaze landed on when he walked outside was the police cruiser parked behind the jeep, where Pengsy chatted through the passenger window with none-other-than Deputy Castillo.

Chad hadn't returned to the Saybrook property to sniff around, because Castillo had been sniffing around for *him* with ferocious determination as the days with no sign of Kirsten Dudley added up. Chad understood why, of course, just as he understood it wouldn't look so good for him if he was seen there. He needed some of the heat off before he went to work, not to mention have a better sense of what he might be dealing with.

Don't forget that it's also because you're scared to look for it, added a mental voice that he would not own. *You're scared you'll find it.*

Castillo noticed him and gave a smile so plastic it would float. He exchanged a few quiet words with Pengsy, who sent Chad a puzzled glance, and the deputy came around the jeep, wearing not his uniform but street clothes.

Chad stopped on the walkway, chomping his gum harder.

"Hello, Hyman," Castillo said, approaching.

"I must be the lead you like best."

"You're my *only* lead, I don't mind telling you. If you would prefer I chase down another, you should start talking. I know you know something. I know you're holding back. I can smell it. What do you think about that?"

"I think it's pointless to tell a stubborn dog it's diggin' in the wrong place."

"What you won't give up, time will tell. There's a circle of bad things going on and you're smack-dab in the middle.

You're looking awful good to me for all this, Hyman. Yes." Castillo gave a humorless smile that wanted to be smug, but mostly came off ugly. "I like you a lot."

"Why else would you have me tailed on a daily basis?" Chad gained no pleasure from the glimmer of surprise in Castillo's eyes. "For the past three I reckon."

"Longer." Castillo swept the houses with his gaze. "Long enough to see you drop by here a couple times and to ask around. The neighbors say you come by regularly. More so in the past than now, but I think that's because you're worried I might be onto your game."

"Please. Fill me in."

Castillo brought his hands behind his back. "The lady of Danny Rothman is the one you've been seeing."

"We're friends."

"I consider the possibility that you might be more, and have been for some time. It could speak to a motive for killing Danny Rothman."

Chad chewed his gum and bit back outrage.

"I consider Abby Arnell could have witnessed such a happening and at some point you found out. You probably tried to scare her into silence, but you lost your trust that she would keep her mouth shut. Perhaps your paranoia got the better of you. Then you killed her, tried to make it look like an accident, and made sure you had someone else with you when you discovered the body."

"If I killed her, why did I toss my lunch in the snow?"

"Theatrics." Castillo shrugged, but his eyes were certain. "How Tom Beamish factors in, I don't know, but I wouldn't be surprised to learn that it had something to do with where you might have hid Kirsten's body on the property, which he had intimate knowledge of. A good temporary hiding place until you could solidify plans to dispose of Kirsten, who you killed

for a motive I have yet to find."

What makes you sure she's dead? Chad almost asked. If she disappeared for the reason he suspected, she was.

"It could be after you killed a few times, you found you liked it," Castillo went on. "It happens. But you killed the girl on impulse without thinking things through."

Chad hated the man for making what he found appalling and outrageous sound so damned plausible, and at the same time gained respect for him and how his mind worked. "You think I'm capable of that?"

"I cut my teeth on big city beats. I think men are capable of anything. I've seen it. Keep in mind though that I've given you only one scenario. I've considered others. How well did that one sit with you?"

"You've got me hooked. Let me know how it turns out."

"You'll be the first to know." Castillo winked, grimacing. "By the way, your wife is concerned about you. She says you haven't been yourself. I wonder why that is."

Chad said nothing, stunned that Trish would have told Castillo such a thing and wary that Castillo would play that card knowing full well it could jeopardize whatever trust he had established between the police and a potentially valuable witness: the wife of their number one suspect.

"That's all right, Hyman," Castillo said. "You have the right to remain silent."

Chad tensed a notch.

Castillo's eyes darted their gaze around and he leaned as if about to tell a secret. "I look forward to saying the rest."

They stared at one another.

"In due time," Castillo finished, and brushed Chad's shoulder in passing.

Chad watched Castillo return to his cruiser. Like something with a mind of its own, his hand reached up to the breast pocket of his flannel shirt, patting it, and found

nothing.

He returned to the jeep, watched Castillo drive off in his mirrors, and looked at Pengsy. "What he say to you?"

Pengsy jacked up his brows, creasing his forehead. "That cop wants your balls with a side of hash browns."

"He didn't use those words, I hope."

Pengsy tossed his cigarette out the window and Chad couldn't help not to think about it dying in the street while it burned off some perfectly fine drags. "Saw it on his face. His words... They was just bullshit." He took a huge bite from his sandwich and went on talking with a mouth full. "Hi-how-ya-doin it's-gonna-be-a-hot-summer bullshit. Only thing he asked was if I thought you were a man of good character, so I had to lie."

Chad snapped his head toward him. "Lie?"

"Yup. Told him you were." Pengsy looked at him dully, chewing. "It was a joke. Lighten up."

Chad watched him ball up the drive-thru bag. "You ate all eight of those roast beef sandwiches?"

Pengsy swallowed the last of the last, nodding.

"Goddamn." Chad fired up the engine and drove. "You may be in for some hurt when your stomach catches up," he said, and Pengsy groaned in reply. "Try eating slower. I was pudgy when I was a kid for a couple years. My mom said it was a metabolism thing, but I think it was cuz I ate everything faster'n my body could tell me it was full."

"I'm never full." Pengsy lit up yet another cigarette. At the rate Chad had seen him smoking lately, he had to be over two packs a day now. "That's the problem. I've been walking around empty for too long."

Chad weighed Pengsy's words and tried to come up with some good ones of his own to approach a touchy subject.

Pengsy saved him the trouble. "I want a drink."

There it was.

Pausing first, Chad told him: "There's not a damn thing wrong with sayin' so. There's two things wrong with the wantin' as I see it." He glanced at Pengsy, who looked receptive enough. "When the want is strong enough, it can trick you into thinkin' it's a need. And the more you think about not bein' able to have it, the more you want it."

"Are you writing a self-help book?"

"But the more you want it, the more it oughta drive home you can't have it. That's how you know there's a problem. That's the point I was tryin' to make."

"Do us both a fucking favor and stop makin' points."

Chad held back the urge to clock him. "Sorry for wanting to help."

"Maybe that's *a want* you should resist too."

"That and a smoke."

"So that's what this is about." Pengsy guffawed, smoke puffing out his nose. "You're still Mister Jones, eh."

It's better to make it about me, ain't it, buddy?

"Every day," Chad said, his tone flat. "If I had a penny for every time I've been on that edge, I bet I could buy both of us a good steak dinner at the Firestone."

"Start saving those pennies. I'll have mine tar tar."

"How about this. I won't smoke if you don't drink."

"Here you go." Pengsy offered his pack.

Chad glared at it. "Nope. And it ain't just cuz I know you wanna see me cave, and I know you do. Bottom line: I gave my word to myself."

Pengsy returned the cigarettes to his shirt pocket.

"What's the word of a fool worth these days?"

"Depends on the fool." Chad noticed something, pausing. "Your age is showin'. You got a few grays standin' out." He watched Pengsy bat down the visor and inspect his head in the mirror, his expression so disturbed that Chad wished he hadn't

pointed it out. "I get 'em too."

His voice pale, Pengsy said, "They're white."

And they were.

"Somebody scare the hell outta ya?"

Chad might have noticed him shudder if he wasn't distracted by the ring of his cell phone. "It's mine," he said, not that Pengsy was checking his.

He was entranced by the visor mirror.

"Ayup?" Chad answered.

"This is Donald Prater from the Valley Library. I'm looking for Chad. He left messages for me here. Is this him?"

"That's right." Chad had questions by the dozens, but didn't want to ask any of them with Pengsy beside him.

"When would be a good time for you?"

"A good time?" Donald sounded confused. "I sense my knack for bad timing has struck again. It says here you wanted to discuss the work of Ed Hoad."

"Yes. I thought I would drop by."

"Excellent. Now that I'm back, I'm here every day from eight AM to nine PM. Drop in any time. Or if you'd like--"

"That would be fine. Expect me tonight."

An uncertain silence hung on the line before Donald spoke again. "Great. I'll see you then."

"Thanks." Chad hung up.

"What was that about?" Pengsy asked, and the response Chad gave was true.

"I need to go see a man who might have some tools I need to fix something."

2

The grandfather clock in the library office struck seven with rusty tolls as Donald Prater opened the door. He led

Chad inside, where the only illumination came from an old-fashioned lamp on a cluttered desk, until he struck a switch. The overheads flickered to life, spilling light, washing away the dusty shadows from shelves of books, video cassettes, binders, trinkets, a little bit of everything but mostly thick old books.

"Excuse the disarray," Donald said.

His hair shoulder-length, beard meticulously trimmed, sweater sleeves hiked up his hairy arms, Donald was a short man with round eyeglasses and a preoccupied air about him. A part of him seemed to be somewhere else entirely and hard at work on something. He could have been deciphering a cryptoquip he memorized from the Wall Street Journal, and Chad wouldn't have been surprised.

"I raided my office in a tizzy last week trying to find a few books I wanted to take the convention." He cleared a stack of books off a chair and collapsed a step ladder. "Since I've been back I haven't had the time to kick my shoes off and settle back in, so..."

"No need to explain." Chad looked around.

To his right, a faded world globe drew his gaze, which then passed over an antique record player, a framed map of Sutton Valley from 1851 when there was barely a town to speak of, and a sculpture of an ape sitting on a stack of books while it studied a human skull.

"I'm sorry that I didn't get back to you sooner, but I wanted to be able to give you my full attention." Donald sauntered around the desk. "I was excited when I learned of your messages. I've found most people interested in the subject of Ed Hoad have a strictly historical curiosity, given the disappearance of the family and all the speculation that's risen from that mystery. When I speak of him in my writing workshops, I keep it mainly about *his work*. It's a subject I enjoy discussing and not a lot of people know much about."

"Somebody must know or they wouldn't be swiping the books from the library. The book I wanted, *The Gibgoblins*. It was stolen, I guess."

"Let me clarify. His work is not well-known in the mainstream." Donald sat in high-back chair and checked his watch, which gleamed gold in a forest of hairs. "Those who do know his work... Well, writers do. Scholars. Misguided people who look for the wrong truths in the fiction. College kids who don't understand the subtext and look for monsters but no meaning. Of course, in all fairness, Hoad can be abstract and downright baroque on the prose level. Heavy-handed, some argue. Overwrought. I'm curious to ask what it was about him that attracted *you*."

"Necessity." Chad scratched his scruff. "Though I reckon I look too lowbrow for you to believe anything else."

"Readers come in all shapes." Donald clasped his hands on his lap. "I admit to having an advantage. Phil told me you looked out of your element in the library. Like a stranger in a strange land, were his words."

"That's about right."

"And he issued you a card. Excellent. He also said you took out *The Jasmanglers*. How was the read?"

"You'd have to ask my wife." Chad sat in the chair across from him. "I gave her the book so she could tell me what it's about. Which she did."

Chuckles rose out of Donald that Chad wasn't sure how to take. "Oh no-no-no. That's cheating. You're a terrible shameless man, Mister Hyman."

The chuckles weakened as Chad watched him blankly.

Donald cleared his throat. "You'll have to pardon my lack of charm. It must have been lost with my luggage."

"It's not you." Chad swallowed his gum and unwrapped new sticks. "And as it turns out, *The Jasmanglers* wouldn't

have helped me much as there ain't any gibgoblins in it."

"Actually, gibgoblins *were* among the creatures invoked by John Reuben and came to infest the furnishings of the manor, among other things in the Hoad bestiary."

"Trish must have missed it."

"They weren't referred to by name. It was a personal name given to them by a protagonist of *The Gibgoblins*, the butcher Herbert Wade who fed them giblets."

"Why would he do that?"

"He believed they were stray animals," Donald said, which made Chad think of Betty Morgan, a thought that fled and was gone. "They appeared that way to him, at first. Mental manipulation is one of their talents."

Chad went rigid, interested. "They can make you see things not there."

Donald nodded. "They're psychoactive beings that rely on trickery for survival. They simply must, given the nature of what they are."

"Which is?"

"Rats in the walls of reality that live only to eat and eat to be." Donald smiled faintly. "That's a line from an introspective passage nearing the end of the book while we're with the hero, Sam Blainey."

"I thought they were goblins, not rodents."

"It's a metaphor. Hoad doled them out in bulk. In fact, it can be said each of his works as a whole are metaphors. His attempt at expressing what ails him by way of demonstration. His demons. His fears. It's the inherent and often subconscious stamp of the messenger on the message." Donald rapped a knuckle on the desk. "It's where the world of substance, our world, and the one of imagination join and procreate. Great works of fiction are the living breathing offspring of that union."

Chad watched the man getting jazzed up by his own

words, most of which sailed over Chad's head but smelled suspiciously like bullshit, and he doubted it was such a good idea to have sought him out.

"Look at people. We all have layers. The outermost ones we show to the world are largely lies, but underneath it all you find the true self. The same could be said of great fiction. It's not the lie, but the truth in the lie that speaks to the spirit." Donald leaned. "That's what gives a book a soul."

"Mmm-hmm." Chad nodded slowly.

Donald raised a finger and opened his mouth as if to go on, and then looked at him sidelong, pausing. "I lost you."

"Somewhere around the messenger bit. Listen..."

"Hoad once addressed his critics through an editorial and told them that they could harm the source by punishing the messenger no more than they could welt the master by whipping the slave," Donald said, chuckling, and started up again. "He often spoke of writing as a medium channeling a possessive spirit. Or channeling *magic*. His analogies to magic were numerous. The difference between a writer and a magician, he said, is one pulls the rabbit from his mind."

Chad's cell rang and he shut it off. He supposed it was Trish again. She had called three times already, assuredly wondering where he was, but he was angry that she had talked to Castillo and knew he would go ballistic on her if he didn't cool down first.

"Go on," he said to Donald.

Not surprisingly, Donald did.

"Hoad believed there were three main types of writers, as there are three types of magicians. The first kind are finger-flingers. Sleight of hand. Parlor tricks. They rely on skill and talk about craft and technique. The second kind are gadeteers. They rely on contraptions set up beforehand so they can focus on presentation. They talk about mechanics

and formulas of construction. Outlines. Plot. They'd probably tell you that there are no original ideas as well."

"Prolly cuz they never had one," Chad said, which made Donald smile and Chad mentally scold himself, *Don't encourage this space-case*. "And what's the third kind?"

"The sort they used to burn at the stake. They're the warlocks. They invoke the magic from somewhere else, or so it would appear. Because this breed of magician channels it *through* them, however, they are vulnerable to whatever comes. If you believe in that sort of thing."

"I don't," Chad said. "Let me guess though what kind Hoad was. Number three."

"That's correct."

There may be a helluva lot more than metaphor to that, Chad thought.

"He used no formulas or outlines," Donald said.

"Inspiration came and the words followed in sequence, leaving him just as in the dark along the way as a reader. He had suspicions, but he didn't--"

"How could you know what the man thought?"

"From articles he wrote and from his editorials in the Valley Gazette when he broached the subject of his work." Donald began rummaging through his desk and Chad hoped against a pop quiz. "People who encourage voices in their heads for too long become susceptible to them, rendering them unwilling conduits of whatever comes, as Ed Hoad. He could no longer shut it off."

"Mmm-hmm." Chad shifted in his chair, aggravated.

"Writers like Hoad see their gift as a curse. If Hoad had been alive in Lord Byron's time, they would have had plenty to talk about. The time the gift takes away from living and family can lead to resentment. He felt victimized and betrayed by it, as it consumed him and filled his head with more words he had to channel out before all the noise drove him mad.

Consider that in context with the plight of Gordon Reuben. It was his imagination that gave *The Jasmanglers* form, and they only wished to use the life he gave them to destroy him. Destroy his world. Did your wife tell you about the storm?"

"Storm?"

"A violent thunderstorm had been building up for days. Approaching from miles away only to peak over Halmer Creek where these powerful forces were to clash. At the point of impact of colliding worlds. This also signifies--"

"Back to *The Gibgoblins* if you don't mind."

"Very well." Donald flashed a frown. "Hoad was an addict and obsessive compulsive when it came to rituals." He went on looking for god-knew-what. "This is linked to the gibgoblin ability to infest objects, widen their sphere of influence. Writers are known to make strong associations between their work and all sorts of things. Drugs, objects, music, art--"

"*You're not answering my damn question*," Chad said, unable to hold back the edge in his voice. "And what the hell are you looking for?"

"Notes I can't find," Donald said, frowning. "And I'm trying to answer you. The problem is that I need to--"

"*The problem is* I ain't a student in one of your damn workshops. I don't mean to be an asshole. Truly I don't. But I'm strapped for time. I need to know about the story. I need to know what a goddamn gibgoblin is in plain fargin English if it turns out that's what I'm dealing with."

Silence.

A shocked yet curious silence.

Donald settled into his chair again, leaning back. "I thought we were talking about fiction. What do you mean what you're *dealing with*?"

"I mean..." Chad rose. "I'm sorry to waste your time."

"You haven't," Donald said, his voice small. "I'll be succinct."

"You'll be what?"

"I'll sum them up. The gibgoblins. From the story."

"Hell with the story. Tell me about the critters."

"You've seen movies that talk about other dimensions parallel to our own?" Donald asked, and Chad nodded.

"Gibgoblins are aberrations imprisoned in their own dimensions, little black pocket dimensions called Grims. They can make connections to our world, but cannot enter. Largely because they are not physical like you and I, not to start. It's through the mind they gain a foothold in reality, which I think you'd agree is not only the world we sense but how our minds interpret it."

"Okay..."

"In order to eat, they lured their meals to what is essentially a one-way door. Once inside, the Grim and the gibgoblins that bolster its substance by their mere existence, it all becomes a part of the victim."

"Say what?"

"Through the mind of the victim, the Grim becomes part of the victim's physical world, legitimizing it as the physical place it simply must be in order to physically enter. Are you with me?"

Chad sighed. "So they're in a place they can't get out and they draw in prey, to a trap, so they can eat them."

"Close enough." Donald gave a small sigh of his own.

"And they did it through the Grim door which was--"

"A freezer?"

"No." Donald wrinkled a brow. "A cellar door to a house in his neighborhood. Where a man had murdered his wife, buried her under the dirt of the root cellar. It was Joseph Jacoby's association with that cellar door that later drove him mad, but also that give rise to the gib--"

"But this Grim door could have been a freezer. Anything with a door, right?"

"Yes. What's this about a freezer?"

"What about other things? Say a painting, or a picture, or a television..."

"I thought you didn't read the book."

"I didn't."

"Any object that's in proximity to the Grim opening that has a door of its own or that opens *mental* or *emotional* doors so to speak. Doors to the heart, the mind, the imagination. Like an old picture might open a door to memories. Anything with images. All these things are attractive to them as windows. They make connections through them, under which they've made things thin."

"Lost me. Under?"

"Imagine reality is your backyard and the gibgoblins are the moles tunneling beneath it. They mine to spy and wield their influence on others. You might say they mine beneath people too. Those susceptible."

"How did that butcher get rid of them? He *did* get rid of them, I hope."

"The butcher Herbert Wade was a drunkard, an exploitable weakness Hoad was intimate with. It made him susceptible, vulnerable in every way. Sam Blainey is the character that defeated them. He was a truck driver, a simple man who lived by principle. A man of resolve. It was the average, common man that Hoad admired. Envied. That's why Hoad's heroes..."

Chad's face had grown long.

"I know, stick to the story," Donald said, a touch of soreness to his voice. "Sam first destroyed the cellar doors. This wasn't enough, however, because while that opening led to the Grim, the entire house had become the host. He tried to

destroy the house, but the gibgoblins influenced others to notice and put out the fire. Sam was even jailed at one point. In the end, Sam went into the Grim itself. Once there, he realized that he couldn't leave until he had killed them all."

"And he could? Kill them."

"Yes, all of them," Donald told Chad, who was happy with that answer and nodded through the rest. "If he hadn't, it would have been disastrous. Fate had preordained him as the destroyer of this evil, an office that the forces which hold the Grim in place are sensitive to. The nature of the Grim changed the moment he entered, no longer a place of torment and succumbing but one of battle. A crossroads where its existence would either fade into nothingness or transcend. By leaving the Grim without destroying the inhabitants, he would have legitimized its physicality to the world. Solidified all the connections. All the windows that had been only psychological would have become more, and the gibgoblins could have then punched through them, through all the places that they had made thin."

Chad rubbed his eyes.

"Think of it like facing a fear. If you finally look into why you have it but then don't conquer it, it could then come to consume your whole life instead of being hidden, something you refuse to admit or have anything to do with. Like a phobia of flying or water."

"I got it." Chad didn't really.

It was a thing to say.

"That was the subtext I was trying to explain to you earlier," Donald said. "Gibgoblins are the personification of the demons that men hold in their hearts, and so often succumb to. They knew from the beginning Sam would be a problem. That he was just the sort of man who could defeat them. *The one*. They tried to get to him many times up to the very end. To no avail. In the beginning, in an attempt to steer

him away and out of their business, they made him forget."

Chad felt goosebumps spreading in a cold rash.

"They tried to ward off what they knew was coming, but destiny--good or bad--is inescapable and cannot be derailed. Hence, they failed there too."

"They sure did," Chad said, drawing another strange look from Donald and cutting him off before he could go on again. Chad didn't want to hear any more. Not tonight. "All right. Thanks. I need to head off."

"Would you like a copy of the book? I have one I can lend to you, as long as it comes back unwounded."

Chad considered and shook his head. "I think I've got all that I need." He offered his hand and Donald shook it. "Can I call you though if I have any other questions?"

"Call me even if you don't. Tell me how it turns out."

"It?" Chad lifted a brow.

"Whatever it is you're, as you said, dealing with."

Chad started for the door and stopped, turning. "I have to ask," he said, pausing. "You're a writer, aren't ya? Of the third kind."

Donald hesitated.

"You aren't?"

"I might have been," Donald said. "How did you know?"

"Why else would you try so hard to make a bullhead like me understand what it felt like?"

"Did I succeed?"

Chad shrugged. "I think a man's gotta accept all that he is. He's gotta own what's his. If he dudn't, he'll never control it. Then it'll become his bogeyman."

"That's just real enough to hurt him."

"I couldn't have said it better. I suppose that's another way those gibgoblins are a, uh, *metaphor*. Right?"

Donald nodded, looking triumphant. "It's what the

gibgoblins often use to lure their victims, or manipulate their helpers."

"Helpers?" Chad wondered.

"People they trick into feeding them or doing them services in the outside world. The latter was problematic for them every time, of course."

"Why for *them*?"

"Those they can influence to that degree are already unstable. Consequently not reliable for long. If at all."

Chad thought of Betty Morgan as he walked away.

"Amen to that."

F I F T E E N

CONFRONTATIONS

1

Around the same time Chad walked through the doors of the Valley Library, Pengsy had been on his phone with Jill and gritting his teeth for more than one reason.

"I'm sorry I didn't call you or answer your calls," Jill said. "I meant to call you later that day when I left the note after we... you know."

I sure do and so do you, but why won't you say it?

"I had to run those errands to pay some of my bills before they closed. It was Saturday so they close early."

And why do you keep justifying? Because I might think you're lying. I gotta wonder if you are. I gotta wonder.

"Pengsy? Are you still there?"

"Yup."

"You're mad at me."

"Nope."

"I meant to call you later that day, but something happened." She let out a shaky sigh. "You know how I never dream and you used to think that was strange?"

"Yup." Pengsy knew Jill and how she placed special significance on the rare event when she dreamed. He had a feeling he knew what was coming, just not the details.

"When I went home, I fell asleep on the couch. I didn't mean to. I must have been tired from the, you know... marathon."

Pengsy had a ghost of a smile on that note, and like a

ghost it was soon gone.

"I'm afraid to tell you, because it's not fair."

"You can tell me anythin'."

"I had a nightmare that we were back together again and you started..." Her voice frayed. "You were..."

"Drinking again," Pengsy supplied, grateful that Jill couldn't see the sneer on his face.

"Yes. And you were angry like you used to be and paranoid and... oh god." She sniffled, sobbed, something. Whatever it was sounded pathetic to his riled ears. "You were chasing after me with a knife and screaming that I made you drink and it was all my fault because I'm such a bitch." There was more memory than dream in that, and Pengsy knew it. "You kept saying that. Bitch, bitch, bitch..."

Another round of sniffles.

Pengsy struggled to keep his voice level. "It was a dream, honey. That's all it was."

"*What did I tell you,*" said his smiling dead cousin, seated in a chair like a Halloween mannequin.

Pengsy glared at Eric, eyes blazing and sweat pooling in his brows as he mouthed the words *shut up*.

"I woke up scared. Scared about us. What happened between us was wonderful, but maybe we moved too fast. I know you stopped. And I'm so proud of you. So proud."

Proud huh? said a bitter voice inside. *So proud you won't forgive, never forgive me for the things I done, and you'll keep going back to it, dragging me down, dragging me the fuck back down to the past that's over and done with and I can't change. Branding me with it. Fucking branding me.*

"It's not fair," she repeated, as if that lessened the unfairness of it. "But it's the way I feel. Scared. Did you think maybe I'm bad for you? Do you think maybe..."

Her voice trailed away and all he *heard* was the bastard hum of the world closing in on him. All he *felt* was the desire

to drink to stop it. He saw himself in his mind's eye, cranking open a bottle of Jack Daniels and taking a good long wonderful swig, a man taking his medicine and liking it. He remembered how it felt on the way down. He remembered *the taste*, so well that it seemed to rise in his mouth.

With a growl, Pengsy purposely knocked that part of his mind out of alignment, the way a man dislocates a shoulder to free himself from a straitjacket.

Silence hung on the line.

"Oh no. I'm sorry. I upset you."

"Of course you did," he said, and thought his voice sounded even enough. "I love you. And this hurts, babe. I don't want to talk about this over the phone. We should talk about this eye to eye."

His face grew long with the pause.

"You don't want that," he said, unaware that his free hand had fisted.

"I do, and we'll make plans to do that."

We'll make fucking plans?

Eric shook his head, pale eyes locked on Pengsy. "Listen to her voice. You know her. You know what that means."

Oh, goddamn you, Eric, shut up.

"Is that okay?" she asked.

"Okay," Pengsy heard himself say.

"I l-..." She stopped, and that stop made Pengsy cringe inside because he knew what the rest should have been. "I'll call you tomorrow night, or the next. Okay?"

"Okay," he said through his teeth.

"Bye, Pengsy." She hung up, and he dropped the phone.

"Okay," he repeated twice, but no amount of times saying it would make it okay.

Her words had offered no hope.

No goddamn hope.

Let's go find some at the bottom of our friend Jack.

He shook his head violently at the thought, but couldn't shake it off this time. He was so tired of fighting it. So goddamned tired. He was too weak and it was too firm, too heavy, a giant hand closing around him.

At least, the idea that it was the alcohol and the desire for it that was the oppressor, the evil to be dealt with, was what his so-called sponsor and the people back at the cult that is AA had wanted him to think after he made THE HAND comparison.

"I drank to survive," Pengsy had said during the first and last time he opened up more than a crack at a meeting. "So that... hand that had a hold on me for so damn long wouldn't..." He fidgeted, nervous standing up in front of that circle of goofballs and feeling like one himself. "Wouldn't crush me."

"What hand, Pengsy?" asked an older man in a suit, who Pengsy pegged as a shrink and later learned he was.

"Life," Pengsy said with an edge. Then he let loose and shared what he never had before and never would again. "The earliest memory I got is when I was four or five, and my daddy gave me a gerbil to hold." He hadn't liked the way their heads were nodding, but it stopped soon enough. "I killed it. I squeezed it in my hand. Dunno why. I didn't mean to kill it I don't think, but I did. Cuz I squeezed it too hard. My first memory was of blood. Blood."

Pengsy grimaced in the silence, pausing. "Not a day goes by I don't think about what I done to that gerbil. Cuz I know how it musta felt. Cuz I spent a lotta time feeling like a gerbil squirmin' in the hand of somethin' bigger. Reality. Life. It closes in if you don't escape." Pengsy reckoned he sounded as idiotic as the rest of them and regretted volunteering anything. "I got oiled up on booze so I'd slip on through if it squeezed too hard. So I'd slip through its fingers. Fingers of

the hand ... that wants to see me bleed."

A man with glasses and curly hair interjected, "*So drinking made you a super gerbil?*" and caused a few chuckles. It also made Pengsy want to bust his grinning face right the fuck in, because while his tone didn't seem mocking, his eyes were. Or so he believed at the time.

Pengsy glared and sat down. "I drank to keep life from squeezing my damn guts out. I'm done talkin'."

Lately, his mind had been traveling in those same old circles, riding the dry bender machine down the worn avenues that he cruised during his drinking days.

Those ended two years ago. Two whole years.

It was hard to believe sometimes, just as it was hard to see that it was something to be proud of and he had accomplished *a damn thing* when the craves still hit him as hard as ever.

'Cunning, baffling, powerful!' No fucking shit. One step at a time. One day at a time. One eternity at a time. Delay, delay, delay. Put a smile on that slippery face and don't you worry about that terrible burning ache inside that makes you feel like your soul is stuck in a garbage disposal cuz we're on the Road of Happy Destiny, boys and girls. Can ya say hallelujah! Preach it, brothers and sisters. Preach from the Big Book and let's see if we can't find some rigorous dishonesty with ourselves and the right tools from the spiritual tool kit to crack our heads open and wash our brains out of all that stinky thinking and damn near everything else. Relieve us from the bondage of self so we may enter the bondage of sobriety with our balls in God's pretty pink purse where they belong and we can be the very best sissies we can be. My name is Pengsy, aka The Dual Diagnosis Guy, and I am an alcoholic. How's my fucking curtsy?

"No." He buried his face in his hands. "No, no, no."

He told himself that he had to call someone, or go talk to someone, anyone, or he was going to *do it*.

"I'll call Chad," he thought aloud.

"Go see him," Eric said. "You'll find him on his back deck drinking Budweisers. He gets that privilege. He can drink whenever he wants. Imagine, whenever he wants. But you can't. Isn't life grand? Isn't it fair?"

It ain't the least bit fair, not the least, Pengsy's mind answered, but a voice of reason left his mouth.

"If I drank all I want, I wouldn't ever stop!" Pengsy hollered at Eric. "Who's fucking side are you on?"

"Padget," a voice spoke.

Pengsy whipped his head around, eyes wide and searching. They settled on the television, the source of the voice that repeated:

"Padget."

A suited weatherman made sweeping gestures with his hand and pointer over a doppler radar screen while he talked about a low pressure system moving into the great lakes.

Then he was gone in a braying blizzard of static.

A man came into focus.

It was not a weatherman.

A cigar burned from the sheepish grin of Pengsy's father, who stood behind a long, gleaming bar counter. Ice cubes rattled in the mixer he was shaking.

"H-e-e-e-y. Padget my boy!"

The view slid down, passing stools and the backs of happy drinkers with beers and margaritas with tacky little umbrellas, and stopped on a large man in a Hawaiian shirt. Hunched over the counter at first, he swiveled on his stool. It was Chad Hyman, tanned, wearing shades, holding a bottle of Bud in one hand and an opener in the other.

"Where ya been? You're missin' out on all the action."

Women in skimpy bikinis drew in around him. Their hair

wet, breasts glossy with oil, they pressed against Chad, felt him up, laughed with their white teeth smiles, and Pengsy went rigid when he saw Jill and Chad's wife Trish was among them.

Chad lowered his head, peering slyly over the rim of his shades as he bobbed his brows. He gave a devilish laugh as he opened the bottle.

"Come on, Padget," Jill said, waving him.

The throng of women in thongs all waved.

Chad raised his beer. *"This bid's for you, buddy."*

Pengsy craned his head to the side, somehow knowing where to look and what he would see.

A freshly opened bottle of Budweiser on the kitchen table, sweating with condensation, waiting.

"Go on and have it, Padget," he heard Chad say, and heard the women laughing, a sound that ran through him and delved down into his darkness where schoolchildren were laughing.

Down there, *they* were always laughing.

"Drink up, Padget Panzy boy!"

When Pengsy snapped his gaze back to the TV, he saw the weather guy again, now with an anchorman behind a desk.

Pengsy told himself he hadn't just seen that.

It wasn't possible. He had imagined it.

Yet the anger stirred up by it raged.

He closed his eyes, drew deep breaths that made his nostrils flare, and looked over his shoulder.

The bottle was still there.

Where had it come from?

It wasn't really there. It couldn't be.

Trembling, he approached it.

He was a man having another strange nightmare and drinking from that bottle, waiting for him, just for him, would

end the dream or make it tolerable.

A good thing either way.

And harmless. Guiltless.

Yes, guiltless.

The bottle is imaginary, he told himself.

The dead man grinning in the corner in his bicycle gear was an imaginary ghost.

The bottle was cold and wet to the touch when he grabbed it, raised it to his lips, and tipped the heel to the heavens.

Pengsy was an imaginary man in an imaginary situation drinking imaginary beer from an imaginary bottle, and that was all fine and beautiful.

Until he emptied the imaginary bottle.

He wanted *more*.

Naturally, he couldn't have just one, not like good old Budweiser-head Chad Hyman could. Pengsy broke his quit. He drank one. Might as well drink them all. He was off the wagon. Might as well enjoy the hell out of it.

Yuppers, ya-fucking-betcha, woo hoo baaaby, it's liberation time, boys and girls. Our time has come! Can ya say halle-fucking-lujah?

He... needed... *more*.

There was nothing *imaginary* about that.

Or the bottle of Jack Daniels and the twelve of Miller he bought that night before the cutoff for alcohol sales.

2

In the broad daylight of the next afternoon, Chad returned to the Saybrook property with a gun. It didn't shoot bullets, but paint.

Red paint, however fittingly.

When he pulled into the cul-de-sac, he saw Betty Morgan out in her yard, tending to her flowers in a paisley dress and

bonnet. She noticed him too, and waved her gardening-gloved hand with a sunny smile that couldn't have been more creepy, given his suspicions about what else other than the stray forest animals she had been feeding scraps.

Chad summoned up a smile of his own and waved back, almost as confident that it wouldn't occur to her to alert the police to his presence--even if they had explicitly told her to do so--as Chad was confident that she wouldn't have the sense of mind to offer him anything useful or coherent if he confronted her about his suspicions.

There were no other cars, no one home at 32 as far as he could tell, and that was a relief. If William Dudley had been there, Chad might have had a problem as Christ only knew what Castillo told him. If a patrol car had been there, Chad *knew* he would have had a problem, such as being arrested, unless he lucked out and the cop was Paul Kemp.

Even then, there was no telling.

In addition to that, he supposed someone might have him committed if they saw what he was about to do.

Whether he deserved it, he would soon find out.

He parked, stepped out with a wary look around, and replaced the Big Reds in his mouth.

Gun ready, chewing machine running, the sun a warm friend on his back, he was ready.

"Let's do it."

Slowly, he moved through the clearing.

He looked hard at the trees and ground. The weeds swayed in the breeze. Those in the spot he was looking for might not be. Then again, he also supposed he might be wrong and the notion that he had lost his mind deserved another chew over too.

Here's one more thing to chew on, said his inner voice.
Maybe it ain't so bright for you to be out here alone.

A chill crawled over him, but he wouldn't abort mission. He told himself he would find nothing, either because there was nothing to be found or *they* had a very deep bag of tricks. It was a good attitude, a safe attitude. Then again, it wouldn't surprise him if he found the freezer either, any more than it would to find the corpse of a little girl inside.

His stomach rolled over. His heart did too.

If that poor girl fell prey to the monsters Prater had described from Hoad's Book, she would be in the Grim.

Whatever was left of her.

And whatever's left of Danny Rothman and some missing hikers and Roy Morgan and Richard Winslow and everybody else that's been on the dinner menu for the past half a century.

The thought made him feel more sick, more angry.

"Fee fi fo fum, you bastards," he said, and the words didn't enlarge him in any sense. He didn't feel like a giant primed to grind the bones of gibgoblins to make his bread, no, rather like a deer in a hunting zone. He had the writhing fright in his belly of an unfit soldier in a jungle of dangers and one wrong step away from a deadly ambush.

He readied the souped-up paint gun that Caroline's squeeze was kind enough to lend him, especially kind after Nick showed up at the house looking for her and Chad threatened certain parts of his.

An idea came to him after he heard Nick talking about games he played with those guns and how nobody could have cheated because, as Nick had said: "The paint never lies".

We'll see about that.

His gaze stopped on something in the weeds.

He approached it as he might an animal that may or may not be dead. Crouching, he took hold of it and drew it up.

It was a strap from one of the times they took the freezer. Art had lost those straps and the set from last time, which Chad suspected lay in the weeds somewhere too.

The freezer didn't come back because we never took it, he thought, knowing it was absurd but had to be true. We thought we did. Thought we saw it. Thought we felt it. Hell, thought we felt the weight of it. But it never left. We took nothing. It's still here.

"Ready or not." He raised the gun.

He started at the end closest to the house and worked his way around, craning as he fired again and again.

And again and--

The gun hit a barrier that was invisible a moment before. His heart jumped, head snapped toward it.

The freezer door flew open, caught him at the shoulder, knocked him back just beyond the reach of the clawed hand that shot out of the black inside.

He tripped backward over his own foot and hit the ground in a sprawl, unaware that he was screaming.

"CHAAAAAAAAD," boomed a raspy voice from the freezer.
"DUNJAAA COME BACK OR I'LL EAT YOU UP!"

He sprang to his feet and shrieked at the black and crusty inside that had a rash of gazing eyes and sharp-toothed mouths at crazy angles. It was true. It was all true. Forgetfulness, hallucinations, spooky stories about old houses and make-believe creatures in books, and even an amazing stupendous magically disappearing and reappearing General Electric freezer was a world away from this, and the difference between was like having anxiety about a tiger on the loose or seen from a distance... and being four feet in front of it, caught in the gaze of its eyes that burned with rabid hunger behind the terrible maw about to rip your body into bloody rags of meat.

It was there, it was real, it was ready, and Chad was *not*, never might be, and he couldn't run fast enough.

The demon voice trailed behind him: *"FRY YA WITH*

SOME FRENCH FRIES AND DIP YA IN KETCHAAAAAAP!"

Chad scrambled behind the wheel of his jeep, which he fired up and nearly crashed as he fled the site. The wheels screamed as he swung onto Saybrook Road.

Hours later, he was still shuddering violently.

In his jeep he had parked on a well-lit street, a *very* well-lit street, Chad took no notice to the Plymouth that had tailed him there. He had trouble holding a thought in his head. He could barely hold his cell phone or dial the digits to William Dudley's number.

Somehow he managed, and the line rang.

"Yes?" said a voice with a touch of hope and urgency.

"M-Mister Didley. This is Ch-Chad Hyman. Chad the handyman."

A quiet hung on the line, only William breathing.

Chad didn't know how to interpret it. "Listen. Whatever the police mighta said to you, I--"

"*Police?*" William sounded alarmed. "About what? About Kirsten?" When Chad said nothing, trying in vain to gather words and calm his trembling, William rose his voice: "Mister Hyman. *Chad!* Do you know something about Kirsten?"

"Listen to me. Just goddamn listen. You remember that freezer you kept having me to come to get."

A sigh. "I don't have time for this."

"Please just listen or I'll have to come up there and make you listen."

"Is that a threat? *Why are you threatening me?* I have more important things to worry about than a stupid freezer. You took it away. I had to ask you over and over again, but you took it away. What the hell about it?"

"I can't explain without soundin' crazy, but it's still out there. Don't go near it. Not under any circumstance. Do you understand me? No circumstance!"

"Why would I?" William said edgily. "And it's not out

there any more. You took it. And for your information, sir, you do sound crazy."

"For your own damn good, humor me. It might try to trick you. *They* might try to..."

A siren chirped. Chad hadn't heard the patrol cars coming until one skidded in front of his jeep, boxing him in. His eyes jerked to the side mirror where he saw the Sheriff's cruiser halt behind him and the door fling open.

"What are you talking about?" William asked. "Hello? *Hello?*"

Pale, wild-eyed, Chad gripped the phone and stared stunned at Castillo when he came to the window.

"Hang up the phone, Hyman." Castillo watched him, flashers swiping red and blue light over his stone face as two officers with hands on their guns closed in around him. "And keep your hands where I can see them."

Chad hung up, dropped the phone, blinking.

"Your luck just ran dry."

From one bad dream to another.

3

During his free ride to the Sheriff's station in the back of Castillo's cruiser, Chad stared blankly, sometimes through the screen mesh at Castillo's glaring eyes in the rear-view, sometimes inside himself where what happened at the clearing kept replaying, and often down at his feet that had betrayed him.

You shouldn't have run, boys.

He should have faced the demon.

But he had been so scared. So goddamn scared.

The first time he spoke above a mutter was when he called Trish. What that conversation was about, other than

the obvious, he didn't know. All he remembered clearly was barking at her at the end of the call when she said that she was coming to see him.

He shook his head when asked if he wanted to call a lawyer, nodded when asked if he understood that he was being held for questioning for crimes he was not yet being charged with but may be, and stuck to head nods and shakes for the first hour of Castillo grilling him down to the bone.

Castillo toted the same theory as before. The love triangle with Danny Rothman and Nina. The murder of Danny, which was witnessed by Abby Arnell. Scaring Abby to death to shut her up. Coming to find that he liked killing. Murdering Kirsten Dudley and hiding her. Going to see Tom Beamish who had knowledge of the property, killing him so he wouldn't talk, and making his death look like suicide.

"Evidence supports that Tom Beamish had some mental problems." Castillo leaned on the table. "I think you're the crazy one. Dangerous and crazy."

Chad nodded dumbly. He doubted there was a man alive who wouldn't have lost a marble or two after what *he* saw.

Yup, he thought. I'm a little crazy now, all right. But I ain't dangerous. I'm too chickenshit to be dangerous, Deputy. I shouldn't have run. I was right there and could have made a difference. And I ran.

"When you talked about Tom Beamish's delusions, you weren't talking just about his, but yours. Verified by your phone call to William Dudley, whom I had a chat with as Deputy Walsh processed you. Why don't you tell *me* about the freezer? You've got plenty to say to other folks. Like Donald Prater. Does that name ring a bell?"

Chad assumed the police tailed him to the library too and nodded again. He was a nodding machine.

"Where's this freezer? Just tell me. We'll find it eventually."

"I don't think you will."

"Hid it that well, did you?"

With a grimace of bared teeth, Chad said, "It hides itself. It's up there. By Dudley's. Right there."

"There is no freezer on that property, Hyman. We've been over it right to left, backwards and forwards, since the day Kirsten disappeared. There's no freezer."

"You wouldn't see it."

"That's right, because it isn't there. Where is it?"

"If you went up there alone to find it, you prolly wouldn't come back, Deputy. It'd get you too."

Castillo breathed heavily as Chad stared at his feet.

"You really are a madman," Castillo said.

"If you go alone, it will. If you take others, you won't find it."

"I have reason to believe that you were once a man of character before all this started. I don't know what happened in your head, but if there's a shred of that decent man left, you will tell me where it is."

"*Why* do you want to know?"

"I expect we might find some evidence in it," Castillo said. "Like the body of Kirsten Dudley that you stowed away in it, just as you confessed to Mister Prater."

Chad looked up. "*What?*"

"Mister Prater supplied me with verbal testimony and will be here first thing in the morning to give an official statement. It's hearsay, but with all the circumstances and coincidences that reason cannot dismiss, it may be enough to cook your goose."

"No." Chad tensed, more alert and together than a moment before. "That ain't possible, cuz I didn't confess anythin' to that head-case except an interest in the books Ed Hoad wrote."

"That's not what he said when he sought me out," Castillo said, puzzling Chad more. "And now Mister Prater is the head-case, huh? I bet everybody's crazy but Chad Hyman. Right?" He looked to the other officers, who stood silent and still. "Right?"

Chad shook his head, eyes yawning with jerks in the sockets as he tried to wrap his mind around the idea that Donald Prater would have told Castillo such an outrageous lie. To what end? It didn't make sense.

Unless you did confess, a dark voice said in his mind. Unless you just don't remember and your memory is all wrong because you're goddamn crazy and guilty of everything this man has been saying. That makes more sense than the alternative doesn't it? Well, doesn't it, Hyman?

"A question." Chad thought about the books. "How did you talk to Mister Prater? Did you see him?"

"Look, I'm through humoring your bullshit, Hyman."

"Answer a question of mine and I'll answer one of yours. Did you see him?"

"I saw a note to get in touch. And I went to see him. Good enough?"

"Did you call him?"

"There was no number, only his place of residence, where he told me of your little chat."

"Place of residence," Chad said numbly. "Did he tell you that he's an Ed Hoad fanatic?"

"He didn't mention it." Castillo's face grew long, telling Chad he wouldn't go along with the questions for much longer.

"When were you at his house?"

Castillo gritted his teeth. "Same time a deputy shadowed you to the place where we picked you up. I came straight to you from the Prater residence. Now it's not my job to give *you* information, but I did. Now it stops. That's all I'm willing to give without something in return."

"I'd be willing to bet he has memorabilia," Chad said. "Possibly from the Hoad house. Find out. And make sure it's him you talked to."

"Who the hell else..." Castillo rolled his eyes. "Fine, Hyman. My turn. Is she still alive?"

He received silence in reply.

He hasn't written her off as dead, Chad thought. He doesn't have a clue, but something feels wrong about this to him, about his own theories maybe. It's in his eyes.

Castillo jolted up out of his chair, gripped the table, yanked it up and slammed it down. *"Is she alive!"* His face had gone red. "Might she still be alive in that freezer or wherever the hell you took her! *Answer me, goddamn it!"*

Chad met his fiery eyes. "I'll tell you this: if she went in that freezer, she isn't alive. That I can assure you. It's a killing thing. It's full of killing things you wouldn't believe unless you saw for yourself. But I didn't put her in it and I sure as hell won't put William Didley in it either."

"What do you mean by that?"

The officers twitched and stepped forward when Chad erupted from his chair. They did nothing when Castillo threw out an arm.

"They'll lure him in. They know their cover is blown and now I reckon they're nervous and hungry. They live to eat. That's what Donald Prater said from the book. They live to eat and they'll eat him, because he's there, he's easy, and I'm sure they're damn well afraid they don't have too many meal tickets left. Not of the full-grown and kicking variety that proly fills their bellies the best."

"You want me to bring psych down here so you can fashion yourself a defense. That's what this is about."

"I didn't hurt or kill or kidnap anyone. *They* did."

"Who?" Castillo said. "Someone else is involved?"

Chad knew he meant someone else involved other than him, but let it go. "Yes."

"Give 'em to me."

"They call themselves The Gibgoblins." Chad never looked away from Castillo's eyes. "The gibgoblins from Hoad's book."

"That's fiction," Castillo said. "You know what they say about that and looking at you, I tend to agree. The truth is always stranger."

"More than you know. William Didley will know soon if somethin' isn't done. They'll go after him next. You need to contact him. You tell him to stay in his house. If you don't, you're making a mistake. Right now that man is in danger."

Castillo blinked, leaned back in his chair, and for a moment Chad thought something the man heard or saw in his behavior had penetrated. "He's not in danger tonight, Hyman. Because he's home, and you're here."

He looked at the officers, cocking his head in gesture.

The questioning was over.

Chad was taken back to the holding cell, flinched at the slam of the barred door, and looked through it at Castillo, shaking his head.

"I suggest you rest up so you're bright and perky tomorrow," Castillo said. "I expect to charge you in the morning. Or maybe in the afternoon. Come to think of it, maybe it won't be till tomorrow night. I'm within my bounds to hold you for twenty-four hours on suspicion." He waved a hand, his cold eyes dead on Chad's. "Until then, get used to the accommodations." He turned and started to walk. "You might need to."

Chad slammed his fists against the bars.

"You're making a mistake!"

But Castillo kept walking.

4

Many miles away, a slow moving thunderstorm led a midnight march of a cold front. It rumbled the skies over Michigan and southern Ontario, rolling slowly but surely toward Lake Erie.

Where it would grow and churn and gain power.

Far ahead of it and the winds blowing over the choppy lake waters, a band of showers crept over Vineyard County.

Around four in the morning, William woke to the patter of it and dank air drafting over him, which he thought nothing of until the memory of closing the windows sent him off the couch.

Head yawed to the side, eyes wide and nervous, he crept and angled his gaze into the mini-foyer, where the front door was gaping. Creaking, it stirred in the breeze that must have blown it open. He didn't lock it any more. With Kirsten still out there somewhere, he couldn't.

In case she comes back, right? scoffed an inner voice. *In case she wanders out of the woods where she's been sleeping and eating berries and was somehow missed by the search parties? Whatever you say, Mister Didley.*

He froze as a new possibility occurred to him. An intruder. His heartbeat kicked up, gaze darted around, feet inched to the light switch.

Click.

The shadows retreated, revealing no one.

Surely it was only the wind that--

His gaze locked on the muddy footprints that trailed across the carpet and he tensed. *Oh no, there is an intruder, there...* He blinked his eyes, peering.

The prints were made by bare feet.

Small feet.

Pausing, locked in place, he stared down.

"Kirsten?" He ignored the rational side of his mind that argued that this couldn't be. A tear running from the corner of his eye, he snapped his head up. "Kirsten?"

Silence responded.

"Are you here, honey?" His voice cracked.

He heard only the riled beat of his heart.

Until...

She giggled.

The sound came from outside, where the tracks led.

He followed them out into the rain and partway down the walkway until the shadows obscured them from sight. When he motioned to go back in to hit the outside lights, a white glow rose behind his car, off toward the woods, in the weedy clearing, and he heard her voice.

"Daddy!"

There was nothing more wonderful in the world than to hear that voice. The sound that wrenched out of him might have been mistook for a sneeze. It was a gasp, a sob, and a cry of joy all wrapped in one.

"Baby, where are you?" He shuffled around his car.

"Daddy, I'm over here!"

The glow receded, but didn't leave.

It remained in a pool around the nasty old freezer.

Terror ran through him, stiffening his joints every notch along the way, but this terror came from a place far removed from the wedge of his mind still able to reason. He didn't remember his conversation with Chad on the phone. He did not remember watching Chad take the freezer away and presumed that it had been there all along. Had anyone thought to look in there? Kirsten had disobeyed him about messing with that thing. Childhood curiosity got the better of her. She must have opened it, went inside, was trapped

inside, just as his paranoid voices had warned the first time he laid eyes on that thing.

If she's been in there, she's dead.

He accepted that and accepted that she spoke to him regardless. The sound of her voice had knocked his mind out of alignment, hung an OUT OF SERVICE sign on his logic machine, and it worsened as the freezer door swung open.

A brilliant light filled the inside and reached out in shafts through the rain.

Deborah appeared with Kirsten in her arms, two angels in gowns with radiant blonde hair.

They were as beautiful as the light, a loving light he felt in his heart.

And his heart led him forward.

"We want you to be with us, Daddy," Kirsten said.

"No more tears." Deborah smiled. "There's no reason for us to be apart now. You can come. Please come. Be with us."

Tears streamed down his face, mingling with the rainwater, and sobs jerked from his throat. He shambled stiffly, dragging a leg like a man with a limp.

He did not question what he saw. He could not disbelieve what he so desperately wanted to believe.

If you go in there, you'll die, said a knowing voice inside.
You've gotta know you'll die.

He knew, and it was okay. Dead was okay. Dead was better. Dead was where his loved ones were. Dead was where they would be together, where he could hold his child and feel her little hand close around his finger.

"I'm coming, pumpkin." Chuckles rose out of his throat, sounds that were more of joy than humor, more insane than sane. "Oh, Deborah. I've been so lost."

"Come to me."

"So... luh-lost."

"Come to me."

And he did, his arms thrown out crazily.

The light flickered like a blinding strobe as hands gripped and yanked him through.

The freezer door boomed shut behind him.

He plunged through black and crashed onto a heap of things that jabbed, rattled hollowly, and flew, as if he had fallen into a pit of plastic toys or oddly shaped pieces of bamboo. Pain ran through him and he groped for something stable, anything, to grip and pull himself.

His hand found *something*--a bar, a handle, something--and pulled, but whatever it was dislodged from the heap.

The object slid between his fingers and stopped.

It was knobby on the end.

The smell of brimstone and blood and rotten meat filled his nose and he suddenly knew that it was *a bone* he held in his hand. He heard something--*many somethings*--stirring in the darkness, but saw only black.

"Deborah?" he said in a tiny voice, the voice of someone talking from their slumber.

Bones chattered and there was a silence.

A nasal, child-like voice rasped out of nowhere:

"M-i-i-i-ster Diiiiiiiiid-leeeeeeeeeeee."

The terrible silence that followed gave way to an orchestra of inhuman giggles. Clawed hands gripped, tugged. Fabric tore. He struggled, knocking a few of *them* away, but soon there were too many. *They* were everywhere.

Teeth ripped into his legs and arms.

Clammy flesh pressed against the sides of his face. Spiky tongues licked. More teeth dug in, teeth that gripped and ripped. Pain became his world. He howled in agony, cried out for Deborah and Kirsten, but he couldn't be heard in the clearing where the freezer stood in the cold rain.

Much less in Heaven.

S I X T E E N

BETTY AND THE BOYS

1

(tommyknockers)

(tommyknockers)

(knockin' on)

The doors to the past and the present, to the real and the unreal, to her mind and the will of the movers with inhuman hands that meant to guide, all the doors were open and what poured through them blended together in a confused cocktail that could only be sensible when strained through the filter of a dream.

An infant was crying, nearly screaming, but it was an idiot drone sound that had no meaning yet.

In the living room of her childhood home in Pennsylvania stood Betty Morgan, an old woman to the waking world and a child to the dead men who stood in the wavering fireplace light. Their faces all grim and half in shadow, her father Charles Cottle, her Uncle Stephen, her husband Roy Morgan from a later life, and Grandpa Cottle himself, whose haunted eyes seemed as large as saucers, cast the gaze of a damning jury.

"She better be good," Grandpa Cottle said.

Betty looked to the others uncertainly, her bottom lip bobbing as it often did before tears, and wondered if her Grandpa was talking about her.

What could she have done?

"Be as good as she can." Grandpa turned his head slowly,

so slowly Betty did not know where he meant to look as his face turned from the firelight but the shadows clung to it just as before, so slowly that the sudden snapping of his arm toward the window made her cry out. *"Or she'll get taken by the Tommyknocker Man."*

Betty looked out the window into the yard.

They all looked.

In the moonlight hulked the faceless monster of a man with a giant hammer, a tool designed to conduct the terrible business of the knockers who watched from the walls and Black Peter who waited in the coal mines for child slaves to torment and at long last devour.

Betty threw her hands over her face, her eyes ghostly wide as they peered between her fingers.

"Oh Lord help her." Grandpa Cottle returned his gaze to Betty, body trembling and face animate with a terror that seemed too great to be true. *"I warned you."* His voice shuddered and his mouth twitched. Did it want to scream or laugh? For goodness sake, he wanted to laugh. He wanted him to get her. *"And now he's here. He's here. Oh why couldn't you make your child be good."*

Betty snapped her head toward the ceiling, toward the source of that shrill infant siren that had been going off all along but only now had meaning.

It was Annie they spoke of, her beloved Annie that was wailing upstairs in terror of what was to come, and the demented thing in the yard was not one of the men in the room before her. It was not Betty's father or Uncle Stephen as a reasonable voice in her mind had long suggested.

That creature in the pale moonshine was... him.

It was really HIM.

"No," she said, breathless, staring out the window.

A statue of horror, The Tommyknocker Man *moved*.

With speed and purpose, he approached the door of the

house and Betty let out a scream so piercing it nearly shredded the fabric of the dream.

He swept past the window.

She ran to the stairs where her brothers John and William and Thomas had been crouched and gaping at what was happening, but they were shriveled old men now who couldn't move fast enough, who tripped and tumbled down the stairs past her and broke brittle bones, as she rushed up to save Annie.

Leaping up over steps at a time, never getting any closer to the top of the stairs, the god-pounding knocks of The Tommyknocker Man booming louder, getting closer, Betty ran and screamed Annie's name at the top of her voice as the stairs, the house, her whole world twisted around her and bled down a drain of infinity.

2

Betty awoke with a start and sat up in bed, still gripped by the feelings of the dream which remained so fresh in her mind, so vivid that...

So vivid...

The pieces fell away.

She felt them going, then forgot they were ever there.

She remembered to smile.

The happy thoughts came.

Smiley faces danced behind her eyes.

They would not stay for long.

3

On the dining room wall, a cannibal messiah and his apostles feasted on a pig with a human face, a stretched-out

caricature of William Dudley's face. The red apple lodged in his mouth muffled his screams and the lines of his wide cartoon-like eyes quivered.

In the early morning light, clad in a pink robe and fluffy slippers, her eyes narrowing, widening, narrowing, widening, Betty watched and chewed on her thumbnail.

Her mind kept turning over what her eyes saw and had yet to decipher it. It tumbled in the chaos of her head with everything else, a tangle of clothes in a dryer. Her lines of reason that once ran in rows had become spaghetti over the years, reality a station with bad reception on the best of days, problem-solving a process of rewiring, but in time connections happened.

How sane they were was best left for others to judge.

Then it came to her.

Betty drew back, hand to her chest, eyes shimmying in the sockets as they swept the painting back and forth. "Have you no decency. You've gone too far this time!"

The messiah raised his black eyes, then an arm. He opened and closed his upraised hand and carnivorous mouth while he cocked his head from side to side.

(Blah-blah-blah...)

"Don't you back-sass me!"

Betty stormed off and got dressed, putting on the dress she ironed the night before. When she heard stirring in the basement, her foot pounded the floor.

"Don't *make me* come down there!"

And it stopped.

Once she deemed herself presentable, she stomped out of the bathroom and into the kitchen where she grabbed a wrapped ceramic dish of leftover roast chicken. She carried it out into the dank drafts, marched into the next yard, and saw William's car there.

His front door was open.

"Oh dear. It's true, isn't it?"

She walked to the door, knocked, rang the doorbell. "Anyone home? William?" When no response came, she entered. She gave the house a walk-through, her heels knocking the hardwood floors and trailing across carpets that didn't have a speck of mud, and went back out into the sun, closing the door, proud that she had figured it out on her own even if she did not approve.

"It certainly is true."

Gripping the baking dish so tight her fingers paled, she headed across the yard and cul-de-sac for

THE SUNSHINE BAR AND GRILLE

as the sign proclaimed on the brick building with propped-open doors. That building once stood in downtown Sutton Valley until it was torn down over two decades ago in *the real world*, but in Betty's, it sometimes stood there beyond the bend of the driveway.

It was the Sunshine Bar and Grille whenever she brought chow to Roy and the boys.

They loved her leftovers and this was of little wonder. Roy was the cook, after all. If only he just worked there now. From the day Roy started *living there*, he had told her there were no ladies allowed, but she had doubts. She heard giggles in the background sometimes that certainly hadn't come from men. *Certainly not*. Thoughts that Roy wasn't being true occurred often, and it wouldn't be the first time, oh no. For awhile she suspected he lost a place for her in his heart, and he had been playing with hers for the good of his stomach.

All about *his stomach*. That's all that wanted her now. Yes, indeed. He had taken advantage of her nurturing side for far, far too long. They all had. Now they had done the

unspeakable and she could not let it pass.

It was the final straw.

She came to make her stand.

From the gloom of the interior came Roy Morgan with the slender body and brawny arms that had landed him the nickname of Pop, short for Pop-Eye. He looked just as he did the day he left the house at the age of 35.

Stains ranged across his white shirt and apron. His rugged face shifting into a smile better suited to a cave man, a smile that used to light Betty's fire, he stopped in the doorway and wiped his hands with a greasy rag.

"How's my purty lady today?" he said with his gravelly voice. "Lookin' good, I say."

Betty arched a brow.

"I'm beginning to wonder if you're sore on me'n the boys. We've been starvin', honey. All these years you've been bringing us some of that lovin'-from-the-oven every few days like clockwork. Now all the sudden." He swept an arm to the side. "*Pshsht!* No Betty. Just what am I to think?" He tilted his head back, peering down his nose. "What'd you bring us today? That's ours, I hope."

"The last you're ever getting." She lobbed it.

It fell short at his feet with a shattering crash.

Roy dropped his jaw. He snapped his head down at the broken dish, up at her, down, up, down, up.

"*Aw, c'mon, sweetie-pie...*"

She shook a finger at him. "Don't you sweetie-pie me, Roy Howard Morgan! I know what you and the boys did!"

Roy leaned back, the skin of his neck in folds under his chin as he pitched his head forward and gave her that old familiar *Have-you-gone-turkeyshit?* look.

"Eating a neighbor. I mean for goodness sake! What would people say!" She propped her hands on her hips. "He was *a nice man*. I hope you're all ashamed!"

He guffawed. "Well, ain't that just one hand slappin' the other! Look who's talkin'. Somebody just as much to blame. Typical woman with no goddamn accountability."

"You watch your mouth, mister."

"I ain't got eyes in there, honey, just a little fool's blood. Same as on your hands, cuz you coulda stopped it, but you didn't. No, ma'am, *you did not*."

She stared hard.

Roy stared harder. "You stepped in a game you had no part of, caught the ball, and walked with it instead of takin' the proper course of action and tossin' it back to somebody. All on account of some lie you told yourself."

Betty wrestled off her wedding rings and flung them. "We are through!" Her voice cracked, but she wasn't feeling sadness as much as liberation. "I know you never planned to come back in the house anyway!"

"That's untrue. I told you I would in time. I've just got so much work and the boys--"

"You can stay here with all your hussies for all I care! I don't want you back in the house! You're not welcome! *I've got all that I need without you!*"

Roy sniggered. "Whatcha got? You can show me your cards, but we both know they ain't been dealt from a full deck. Seems to me all you got besides me is a buncha animals that'd munch on you just as happily, if it was you lyin' on the yard or the freggin driveway instead uh last week's leftovers. Your brothers are gone. Your papa's ticker went. The dog ran away. And you don't have Annie neither. I don't know how many times I gotta tell you *that*. Annie's gone. She's gone. No matter how many smiley faces you draw."

Betty shook her head madly.

"But you've got me. Always have. And some day--"

"I don't want you." She shook uncontrollably. "You're not

my husband! And I'm never coming here again!"

Roy crossed his arms, the black of his eyes spreading until it encroached on the white, his lips snarling over jagged teeth. "You will at least once more, cuz you owe us back what you took."

"Go to Hell," Betty said, the strongest words she had used since Carter was in office, and she stormed away. "I hope you all starve to death!"

SEVENTEEN

GUIDING FORCES

1

In the custody of the Vineyard County Sheriff's Office, sleep had only come to Chad in slices overnight, much of it spent sitting in the corner of the cell with his back against the wall, arms on his knees, and head slumped. The cot had looked enticing at times but he never used it.

Trish came in the morning to see him. She brought Buck as there was nowhere to leave him short of driving to her parents' in Erie, where Caroline was better off staying, all things considered. Trish hadn't wanted to bring him the night before, given the late hour Chad had called home. Chad didn't want Buck there now either, and told her so each time she came and went as the morning wore long.

"He's fine," she said from where she sat on the cot.

Chad pushed off the wall. "The child shouldn't have to see his daddy in a jail cell. For crissake."

"I didn't bring him in here, did I?" Trish sighed into her hands. "The deputy gave him candy and the dispatchers are showing him the neat radio stuff."

"While they're all trying to hang his old man." Chad paced. "I should have ended this when I had the chance. And you. What was the big idea of telling that Castillo I was acting off?"

Trish cocked her head, blinking. "I didn't. Though maybe I should have because it's true."

Chad stopped, scratching his scruff. Longer now.

"Why won't you let me call the lawyer?" she said.

"I don't *want* a lawyer. People who've done something wrong want a lawyer and I'm not one of those people." Chad lowered his brows. "By the way, you changed the subject."

Trish gave an angry sigh. "I called the Sheriff's office, in case you were giving a statement about that man who committed suicide. I wondered where the hell you were. I wondered the same thing last night. Now I know. You were getting arrested."

"You say that like I deserve it. Do you think I could do any of these things?"

"No, I don't, but Chad..." She lowered her voice when an officer passed the cell. "You have to admit that the stuff you told me is a little hard--"

"I shouldn't have said a thing. I should have known better than to think you'd believe me." Chad walked to the door, gripping its bars. "I thought you would. I thought you knew me well enough to know I wouldn't make up--"

"Get off your high horse..." Trish rummaged through her purse.

"If you're digging for cigarettes, forget it. You can't smoke in here. Kick the habit and it won't be an issue." Chad tried not to think about the fact he had just lied. He had gone months and still wanted one badly. It was still an issue. It was a *deluxe* issue, complete with inserts and foldouts. "Did you get me gum?"

"Shit. I can walk down the street. It's right--"

"Forget it." Chad wondered if he would have any teeth left from all the grinding by the time Castillo reappeared to announce his fate. "What time is it?"

"Quarter to twelve. The deputy said he can hold you through till tonight before he releases you."

Chad chuckled. "Who says they're gonna release me?"

"I *thought* he did."

"It ain't likely, considering he's got a witness who says I confessed to him about taking that girl. I still can't believe he would say a damn thing."

In fact, I'd bet money he didn't. They did.

"Who? Who's this witness?"

"Donald Prater. This librarian who's totally into Hoad. He told me about the gibgoblins, and that's what's in that freezer."

"Chad..."

"Don't Chad me. I know I'm right." Chad kicked the bars. *"I know I am!"*

Trish sprang up. "Stop it. Or you're going to get the wrong kind of attention."

"It's clear I already got it or I wouldn't be here, uh?" Chad eyed her, crossing his arms. "Tell me what you're thinking. Do you think I would have killed Danny?"

Her jaw went lax. "They think you killed him too?"

"Mmm-hmm, cuz I was having an affair with Nina."

"You were?"

"No." Chad scowled. "We've been through that."

"I believed you then," she said, pausing. "I believe you now." There had been hesitation, but he sensed no deceit. "I believe when you say you're not guilty of--"

"Don't use those words." Chad flung up his hands. "Makes me feel like a damn criminal."

"You *are* a suspect. I mean, that's why--"

Castillo's voice cut in: "He is indeed a suspect, ma'am." He opened the cell. "And very much on the hook."

Chad heaved a sigh. "Here comes the bad news."

"It is bad news." Castillo folded his hands behind his back, lowered his head a notch. "I have to cut you loose." He looked up sharply. "I didn't have to do it so soon either, but don't you extrapolate anything favorable from that. As it

stands, you're still the only one on my dance card and you had better believe I will be watching you."

"Fine." Chad wondered. "What happened to Donald Prater and the confession?"

"There's been a change," Castillo said, deadpan. "It lends me no doubt that you're responsible for all this in some capacity. However, it appears I was mistaken and there was a miscommunication."

Chad nodded. "Nice bluff."

"Deputy," Trish said, and Chad cringed inside at having recognized *that* tone. "Is it true that you--"

"Let it go, honey." Chad set a hand on her shoulder.

Castillo's eyes went from Chad to Trish and back again.

"No." She brushed Chad's hand away. "You lied to my husband about the conversation we had?"

"It's possible we may have had a miscommunication as well, ma'am," Castillo said, still pokerfaced, a professional. "These things are known to happen when tensions are high and there's a crisis of great public interest, such as a missing little girl."

His eyes slid and stuck on Chad's.

"Who is still unaccounted for," he added.

Trish crossed her arms. "This is ridiculous."

"He's doing his job," Chad said, at the risk of a scathing look, which came. "As long as he doesn't know what happened to Kirsten, he's gotta do all that he can to find out, including breaking a suspect however he can."

"Your husband's right on all counts." Castillo's black eyes never left Chad. "I hope for your husband's sake he had no part in it. The more time that passes, the less I expect to find her alive. If that's the case, you can be sure I will personally pull the skin off whoever did it."

If you can stop the gibgoblins from pulling the skin off you first, Chad thought.

"If you're not arresting Chad, we're leaving." Trish grabbed Chad's arm and pulled. "Come on."

Castillo threw out a barring arm. "One more thing."

Chad saw Trish looked ready to throw a fit and he put an arm around her, massaging her shoulder. "What?"

"By all rights I should have called the white coats on you after those statements you gave, Hyman." Castillo licked his lips. "Do you stand by them?"

"The statements you won't believe cuz they're damn unlikely?"

"That would be them."

"That depends. Could my answer make that door slam shut again or land me in the funny farm?"

"No. You'll be walking out of here today."

"Then I stand by them, because I stand by the truth. No matter how strange. Like you said. The truth's always stranger than fiction. Ain't that what you said?"

"I received a call two hours ago from Kirsten Dudley's grandfather. He's concerned about his son-in-law, the girl's father. William Dudley." Castillo wasn't a man who gave much away, but Chad could tell he was uncomfortable saying the words. "It's too early to file Mister Dudley as a missing person, but..."

Trish tightened her hold on Chad. "My god."

Chad closed his eyes, shaking his head.

"He's nowhere to be found. I just returned from the house. It *is* suspicious."

"But not unexpected." Chad opened his eyes. "Was it?"

"If a crime was committed overnight against Mister Dudley, I couldn't possibly hang it on you, as I knew just where you were." He glanced at Trish. "But don't you think I have discounted the possibility of an accomplice."

"Do you think I'd warn you if I wanted harm to come

Mister Didley's way? I told you it would happen. I did."

Castillo drew in a deep breath, a scowl trying to show through. "You told me that Mister Dudley would fall prey to make-believe monsters that live in a freezer that isn't there." He dropped his arm. "You can go now."

"They exist," Chad said. "And it's there."

"How can you look at me with a straight face and talk about hobgoblins when--"

"Gibgoblin, Deputy. A butcher named Wade fed 'em giblets in Hoad's book. But they ain't just in a book now. Maybe they never were." Chad led Trish out of the cell. "I'm getting my son and going home."

As they walked away, he heard Castillo say: "Go home, Hyman, but don't go near the Saybrook place. I mean it."

After retrieving Buck from the dispatchers, who seemed nice enough, they went out to the sedan. Chad spotted Castillo staring out a window as he drove away. By the time they grabbed lunch, sprang his jeep out of the automotive jail that was the impound yard, and returned home, most of the afternoon was gone.

Then he made calls. The first was to Stuart Sheldon at the office whom Trish had already told what was going on and thankfully in little detail. The second was to Art Kroppel to see how backed up the crew was, and it wasn't bad considering they were short Chad.

And Pengsy, who hadn't called in, hadn't called anyone, and wasn't answering the phone.

Chad worried a little. He didn't have the energy for anything more. He presumed Pengsy blew a gasket when Chad didn't show to pick him up, said *fuck it*, and didn't answer his phone for the sake of general pissed-off principle.

That was Pengsy.

Nonetheless, Chad tried his place.

He got nothing too, just the machine that gave no

greeting message. Only a beep.

Chad wouldn't have let it go at that ordinarily. His mind would have nagged with different scenarios and guided him to his jeep and on the road to see him, but his mind was tired. His brain felt like a shriveled little heart throbbing in the slushy hollow of his skull. He was emotionally ragged and the terror from what happened the afternoon before was still with him, an arctic thunderstorm swirling deep down in his gut and every bit as ferocious as the real storm that the yahoos on the Weather Channel yammered on about.

A weatherwoman toted it as rare event not to be missed.

"The conditions are perfect for this to be a severe weather event, folks," said Lucy the weatherlady, one slender cut of candy to Chad's weary eyes. "As this cold front moves through, this storm has the potential to pack a supercell punch."

Chad changed the channel to TNT when Trish entered the living room, feeling absurdly guilty for the mini-fantasy that had begun in his head as a welcome distraction.

"Why won't you lay down?" she said, again, with that shrill tone that caused a twinge in his ears. "You said you barely slept all night."

"I'm watchin' this." Chad tucked the remote between couch cushions. "Don't need a nap."

She sighed and sat in the chair.

He didn't think he could sleep, but didn't fight it when he found himself drifting off, forgetting Trish was in the room, forgetting there was a room.

Fading.

His gut told him that he would need the rest, for more reasons than the lack of it overnight in lockup.

The Hammer Man would need all the rest he could get.

2

Joe Rendell held no blame in his heart for his son-in-law William over Kirsten's disappearance. The idea of the man being negligent when it came to that child was unthinkable, given how overprotective he had been, especially after Deborah passed on. This behavior never bothered him or Mary. If anything, it offered comfort.

Only when looking years ahead had Joe harbored concerns as he too clearly envisioned William coddling her into adulthood. A sheltered life was hardly the worst thing that could befall a child, but not the best way to prepare them for the cold and unforgiving climate of the real world.

Knowing William had taken Deborah's death hard, so hard that Joe could not doubt his love for her but had reason to question his ability to recover, Joe adopted a wait-and-see attitude. *Time heals all wounds* was an adage believed only by those with no experience of the damage fate can inflict. William's might never heal or Joe's for that matter, but Joe knew time could provide some semblance of distance with which William might loosen up.

At least in the meanwhile, Joe had never worried about whether William would keep their granddaughter safe.

He would, unquestionably.

Nothing would come to harm her short of an act of God or some other power far beyond the control of the most doting father, Joe had believed, and that assessment had not changed now that something *had* happened.

It had always been plain to see, however, that William would have shattered long ago absent of the little one as a source of strength. This was why Joe had not been surprised as to the extent that he fell apart when she vanished. His

hysterics. His near frenzy. Joe might have succumbed to the terror of it all and come to pieces too, if he hadn't been so busy dealing with William and the situation in general.

The duty of holding a level head had fallen on him. There was no one else. That wasn't to say Joe was any less devastated. Kirsten's absence and the *not knowing* kept his heart in a stranglehold and his mind was just as prone to contemplating awful possibilities as any man's, yet Joe was bolstered by a powerful thing that might have still lingered somewhere inside William, stumbling around and trying to find its way out of the dark, but had long been missing from his eyes.

Hope.

That things would somehow turn out right.

Faith that Kirsten was alive and God would bring her back shined inside Joe like a beacon to the mercy that dwelled in the hearts of the fates. Kirsten couldn't be needed more in Heaven than she was on Earth with the little people who adored her. It wouldn't be long before Kirsten called Grandpa Joe a silly-head while they played Chutes and Ladders and sucked down *stwah-bewwy miwkshakes*, or The Big Guy would have a lot of explaining to do. Joe had even told Him so when he last prayed. The Lord was on notice.

Now he prayed for the return of William, whom Joe didn't quite think of as a son-he-never-had but the closest life would give, and scolded himself for not watching him more closely.

Then again, William had shown every indication of getting better since his initial breakdown. All his nervous energy had funneled into efforts that could help bring Kirsten home, rather than sitting around and letting his fears eat him alive while he waited for news.

William had checked for messages often when he was away from the house. The last day Joe had been out helping

him post flyers, William must have called his home machine every thirty minutes. Sometimes less.

Joe last talked to him the night before, when he told him of the strange call by Chad Hyman, who the police considered a person of interest and held for questioning. William had seemed more apprehensive about this development than encouraged, as if the happiest ending he had in him to see was never knowing and *the worst* was now coming. How far he might go to avoid having to accept it and let it become real, Joe could only speculate.

All Joe knew for sure was that between the time he hung up with William last night and when Joe came by that morning with coffee and donuts as planned, William had left the house and *could not* have been in his right mind.

His sedan was still in the driveway, keys to it on the kitchen counter beside his wallet, jacket flung on a chair, and *his sneakers* at the foot of the ruffled couch.

William might have had another pair of shoes other than the dressy ones in his bedroom or his boots in the hall, but Joe doubted it.

Alarmed, following his gut rather than the voice inside that told him he was jumping the gun, Joe had phoned the police. He couldn't shake the images in his head of William wandering barefoot into the woods with the glazed eyes and stagger of a man drunk on madness. The images came too easy and wouldn't fall. They hung too well.

Deputy Castillo seemed to have other suspicions, not that he voiced them as he had a look around that morning and then hours later around supper time.

In his blue-black uniform, Castillo moved through the house slowly. His motions were as deliberate and careful as where he trained his gaze, his eyes the windows of a mind at work. "You stated earlier that you've had no contact since last night. I presume that is still the case."

"I'm afraid so," Joe said. "He hasn't even called the machine to check messages. But he didn't take his cell phone. I don't know what I'm more surprised he didn't take, Sheriff, his phone or his shoes."

"Deputy," Castillo corrected. "I can forgive you for the slip. *Sheriff* has a nice ring to it. Not nice enough to offset the paperwork that comes with it. I would never go through the headache of running only to land what amounts to a desk job in this county."

"Can I quote you on that?"

Castillo shook his head with a faint smirk. "No."

"I suspected as much." Joe chuckled, as much as he was able under the circumstances.

"I belong in the field." He stopped where he began, at the couch. "No pay hike is worth going stir crazy."

Joe nodded, looking down at William's sneakers and the socks tucked into them. "I want to thank you for the attention you've given, Deputy. It was more than I could have hoped for. I expected to be told there was nothing that could be done until a certain amount of time passed."

"You were right to let us know."

"Not that I'm ungrateful, but was there a reason for the quick response that you haven't mentioned?" Joe measured his silence. "Do you have any thoughts about William?"

"At this time, your guess is as good as mine, Mister Rendell." Castillo gestured to the door. "I'm going to take another look outside to see if there's anything I missed. While there's still daylight."

"I'll join you in a minute after I make some coffee." Joe started for the kitchen. "Would you care for a cup?"

"I have to limit my intake. Thanks, though." Castillo walked out.

After Joe loaded up the coffee maker and set it to brew, he

went outside where the wind had risen, pushing the humid air around without cooling it. Everything felt sticky. The mosquitoes were out early. The rustle of the leaves in the trees sounded muffled, heavy. Birds glided lazily under a seamless gray sky.

He saw Castillo standing on the edge of the pavement, facing the weedy clearing with his hands hooked by the thumbs on his trouser pockets, head craning very slowly.

What is he looking for? Joe wondered.

Castillo would have been at the foot of the walk that led to the porch of 34 Saybrook, if it had still been there.

Joe could not look at that clearing without seeing the ghost of that house. Inside him, it was never "The Hoad House" as the townsfolk and even he sometimes called it. In his heart, where there lived an eight year-old boy named Joey who hadn't grown up and still missed his friend, it was and forever would be *Gary's house*.

Prior to the day William moved into 32, Joe hadn't stepped foot on that cul-de-sac in over thirty years. Coming back to find that almost nothing had changed was surreal. With the exception of the missing house, it looked the same. Nearly untouched.

Only lately, with the heart-ache of Kirsten disappearing tapping into old feelings that were alive and strong, did the memories seem less like snapshots and mental reels from an age that time had forsaken, but real.

Real enough to touch if only you reached.

Places real enough to enter if you knew where to step.

How well that place brought out the little boy inside startled him almost as much as how clearly he could see through that boy's eyes into a place where the past was not gone, but asleep and dreaming, waiting to wake.

Now more than ever, he swore he felt it *wanting* to.

Joe didn't need to close his eyes to see it.

William's sedan wasn't in the driveway.

William wasn't even born yet.

The yard underfoot belongs to the home of a young Martha and Henry Boggs, whose Cadillac shines in the sun in the driveway. His pipe smoke drifts pleasantly from next door where he and Roy Morgan are arguing again about property lines. Their wives, Betty Morgan and Martha Boggs, slender and sweet, are on the cul-de-sac, giggling and talking in hushed tones about the childish nature of men.

"Here comes those other rascals," Betty says with a twinkle in her eyes, and the ladies move.

Little Gary Hoad and Joey Rendell with his lucky coonskin cap cry out hellos as they race to Gary's yard, where his dog Pepper is chained to a post and barking. Gary wins the race. He always does. They ditch their bikes, pedals wounding the grass and back wheels spinning.

They run into Gary's house and through the living room where *The Search for Tomorrow* breaks to a *Spic and Span* commercial. Mister Hoad must not know the television is on because the volume is down. If he finds out, he's sure to get sore, because no one is watching it right now and the radio is on. Rosemary Clooney is singing.

Gary's mom sings with her in the kitchen where she is washing dishes, her dark hair tied back in a bow and flowing down the back of her green dress. She turns and smiles at the boys. For how often she fights with Mister Hoad, it is a wonder she can smile at all.

"We're thirsty, Ma! Can we have something to--"

"Of course you can." Gary's mom crouches down with a finger to her nose, eyes moving toward a door that probably shouldn't be ajar, but is. "You're going to disturb your father. Settle down. Would you like some milk?"

Gary swings his top half around toward Joey. "Milk?"

Joey nods crazily and puts his hand on his head, making sure his coonskin cap is still there. He lost it once and worries he might lose it again.

Gary and his mom are talking now.

Joey isn't listening. He's looking through that partly open door, curiously into that room. Gary's dad spends most of his time in there and nobody minds, because when he's in there, he isn't yelling at anyone.

It's hazy in that room from all the smoke that Joey can smell but is used to from his own pa. Mister Hoad is sitting at his desk, at his typewriter. It's good that he's typing fast, because when the typing is slow, Mister Hoad is in a bad mood.

It's *fast*.

The hurricane of clacks and rasps and chimes coming from that typewriter could scarcely be believed to be caused by a man at all, but rather a machine, one that runs on cigarettes and booze and the brutal grace of whatever force is blazing in his eyes.

He is in his own world. This is a good thing and probably why he hasn't gotten mad about the TV or the radio or the noise Gary's mom is making.

Joey's heart jumps when the typing stops.

Mister Hoad is looking at him now. He rises. His clothes are wrinkled. They are always wrinkled. Snarls of hair hang over his forehead. His eyes are either uncannily alert or dazed. Today they are dazed, but no matter which they had been, they are always *annoyed*.

Joey flinches again when Gary slaps his shoulder and hands him a glass of milk, which Joey guzzles down.

Gary suggests they play in the house, but his mom says that's not a good idea. This is reinforced when Mister Hoad appears in the smoky doorway of his office.

Gary hasn't noticed yet.

Joey is scared, and even more scared when he sees in Mrs. Hoad's eyes that she is a little scared too.

"Go play outside, boys," she says.

"Can we go upstairs and grab toys?" Gary asks. "Can we?"

"Make it quick," she says, and the boys start moving. "Run, run."

The boys fly up the stairs into Gary's room, where lincoln logs and matchbox cars are strewn like wreckage from a tornado. Both boys grab Pez dispensers and motion to pop some in their mouths. Instead they make faces. Last time they ate so much that they had tummy-aches and swore the stuff off for good.

The boys decide on playing army men and grab the checkered cloth bags Gary keeps them in. When they run back through the house, they hear Gary's parents yelling. Joey is disturbed by this.

For Gary, this day is no different than others.

They run out to the side yard, where there are already a scattering of infantry from previous battles. They are holding the territory.

Once they dump their bags of army men, they set them up on the field. They both command the good guy army, not the guys who are black but green. Still, someone must set up the black ones and it is Joey's turn.

Gary sets up the good guys, trained and ready to fight with their bazookas and rifles and their hearts for all that's good and true. He takes some platoons to the side. These are the reinforcements that are the last defense against today's menace. He places them in their secret underground bunkers, buries them in holes that Gary easily makes where the grass is worn away and soil is loose.

Pepper likes to dig there. He's barking in the backyard.

Maybe later they will unchain him and play Frisbee with him.

Not now though.

For it is the eve of war. It's battle stations and General Gary and Colonel Joey have some decisions to make, such as who the bad guys are today.

"The Nazis again," Joey says. "They're the lowest of the low."

"How about..." Gary tenses and trembles as something shatters in the house.

The voices of his parents rise. Mister Hoad is yelling, Mrs. Hoad crying.

Gary looks like he might too as he looks over his shoulder at the kitchen window. He and Joey flinch when something else booms and breaks.

Mister Hoad's voice trails off.

A door slams.

There is silence.

Then they hear Gary's mom sobbing.

Gary looks like he wants to go in, but is afraid to. He sniffles and looks down at the army they have assembled.

Seeing them reminds him of his purpose and duty.

This is his way of dealing with everything.

"It's not the Nazis today," Gary says.

"Who is it?" Joey wonders.

"Don't ask." Gary is composed now. His face is strong. "That information is secret, Colonel. But I know. And our army will prevail!"

"Will prevail!" Joey echoes.

Gary salutes. "Give the order, Colonel."

And Joey does.

Soon they are in the heat of war, and the bad thing going on in the house is forgotten for a while.

Now they are kids being kids. That's the only thing that matters. This is their time in the sun. These are their shining

moments.

The *magic* is *theirs*.

Years later, a lifetime later, Joey still feels it ... and remembers.

Joe Rendell remembered it all, and wiped away the tear that had crept from the corner of an eye.

So much tragedy, he thought. *So much tragedy for one little shady cul-de-sac*. He counted the misfortunes in his head starting with the Hoads and the list was long. That wasn't including the ones that might have happened that he didn't know about. *And now my granddaughter and son-in-law. There really is something wrong with this place. There has to be.*

He looked around, reorienting to himself to the now.

His feet brought him down to the foot of the yard. His gaze swept toward Saybrook Road and fixed on Betty Morgan, who had been quite the looker back in the day, still was really, save for that way about her that told Joe her mind was dying under that healthy sheen of silver hair.

Talking to no one, she dispensed birdseed along the edge of the pavement in front of her house.

Betty, me, and Henry Boggs are the only ones left from those times, he thought. *So why doesn't it feel that way?*

Joe looked the other way with the sudden feeling that he would find Castillo gone, another soul vanished into thin air.

Castillo hadn't moved. Back turned, hands still hitched on his pockets, he stared into the woods.

Running a hand over his bald head, Joe passed the cruiser and stopped beside Castillo, who surely knew he was there but didn't show it.

Neither of them spoke at first.

Then Castillo broke the silence. "I don't see it."

"What are you trying to see?"

Castillo took a little too long to answer. "How any of it fits. *If* any of it even does."

"I should have insisted William pull out of renting the Boggs house and made up the difference for the security deposit out of my own pocket if I had to," Joe said, drawing Castillo's hesitant gaze. "I shouldn't have let him live here with my granddaughter."

"There are worse places to live."

"You know some say a person is the culmination of all that's happened to them. Lately, I've had to wonder if the same should be said of places."

"I can't say I follow."

"Maybe all that's happened in a place... is what that place is."

"I don't agree. People change. Places too."

"Some don't," Joe said. "I think there's evil here. And it's been here for a long time."

"Places have no memory of what occurred there, only evidence that it did."

"Are you sure there's a difference?"

Castillo sighed. "I believe there's evil in people, Mister Rendell. Evil in places..." He shook his head. "That has not been my experience."

"I don't want to stay here tonight." Joe glanced back at the house. "But I have to. William could come back. Somebody could call. There's a phone number for the police on the flyers, but for the house too. Mary left me back off a few hours ago."

"I wondered where the Saturn was. Is your wife coming back?"

"Not tonight. She's gone to her sister's where the family has gathered. Mary needs that support, but I can do without all the crying and drama, truth be told."

"Understandable on both counts." Castillo shook his hand

and they walked to the cruiser. "I'll keep in touch with any news."

Joe nodded. "If anything comes up here, I'll call."

"I hope you've battened down the hatches back at your house." Castillo climbed into his car. "There's a hell of a storm on the way."

3

A relapse first happens in the mind.

And the mind is a monkey.

Addicts fall off the wagon because the monkey leans too far off the edge to keep its balance. The monkey is too entranced by what it sees to remember it needs to hold on, much less that there's anything to hold onto.

The resulting fall, which leaves the addict drenched in the stuff that drowns all reason and blinds the monkey, appears to be sudden.

But it happens gradually.

Most alcoholics return to their old drinking patterns the same way. They take a step into the shallow end of the booze pool and gravitate, in denial to others and often to themselves of what they now *know* without question: the demon they hoped to be gone still swims beneath the surface, has a hold on them, and is pulling them slowly but surely to the deep end where the level rests high over their head.

Then there are men like Pengsy.

Who cannonball off the high platform.

Pengsy spent the past two days hard at work making up for lost time, seven ways passed shit-faced and on a warrior's quest for seven more. He had the fridge stocked, his tanks loaded, his soul on the rocks, the world on ice, beers slamming, tunes jamming, and the party kicked into high gear. Pengsy

was the party. He was rock and roll with arms and legs.

Come one COME ALL and see this glorious animal that broke the chains of captivity and now runs liberated and naked and free through the wild as that sweet bitch Mother Nature intended.

Pengsy was A-O-K in the U.S. of Fucking A.

In his bedroom, wires ran everywhere from the components of his stereo, which he had hauled in from the living room and hooked up so he could have some tunes when he last put the party on hiatus for some shut-eye.

The CD now on its third play skipped, then quit.

Jeering, he rose unsteadily off the bed, where he had been sitting on the edge, pounding his foot and thrashing his head to the music for some unknown time.

He staggered into the reflection cast by an object that once adorned Abby Arnell's bedroom wall at 32 Saybrook, an object that had bothered him greatly not too long ago but he had since hung without a thought about it.

When he caught sight of his twin, he stopped, weaving, and swigged from his old best buddy Jack Daniels.

"Mirror mirror on the wall..." The men grinned at one another. "Who's the drunkest... of 'em all?"

They cocked their bodies toward one another and stuck hands to their ears. "*What's that?*" And they laughed and righted themselves out under the heavy gravity.

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle!" Pengsy said. "We've gotta try harder, brother!"

Something slammed overhead, then again, and *again*.

Jags of the cracked paint on the ceiling broke loose.

The upstairs neighbor pounded and yelled.

Pengsy froze.

(Mrs. Warza, that bitch, that bitch, fucking with me, trying to ruin my good time, nobody ruins my good time, nobody, NOBODY...)

He snapped his face up, his happy thoughts gone at warp speed. "You stop that r-i-i-i-ght now! Don't you call the cops again or I'm gon' get mad!"

She had yesterday, which Pengsy forgave.

Tonight he did not feel so forgiving.

She pounded again.

She *dared* to pound again.

"Don't make me come up there now! I'll make you sorry! I'll make you sorry with my b-a-a-a-re hands!" His voice rose to a roar. *"I'll rip the riggins straight out that dike cunt and wear 'em as garters if you fuck with me again! You want me to come up! IS THAT WHAT YOU W-A-A-A-A-NT!"*

There was silence, and the happy thoughts returned.

The beast had its say, got its way, and was appeased.

It tasted the fear in that silence.

With fear, there is respect, and that's all a red beast wants. Just a little goddamn respect.

CD cases cracked underfoot when he lumbered to the stereo. He crouched, feeling a trifle generous, and turned down the volume some. He fumbled the CD as he removed it from the tray, replaced it with an old *Talisman* CD when the band was more death metal than doom metal and guitarist Gideon Platt was at his hellish best, and Pengsy played some air guitar when the first track kicked in.

"Slow down with the drinking," said his cousin from the corner, beside the window where a fan blew in damp air. Eric had said the same many times already, only to be ignored.

"We've got work to do tonight. Soon."

Pengsy looked over his shoulder, having forgotten Eric was there but absolutely all right with it. His cousin was there, his cousin was living dead, and his cousin was manageable.

Everything was manageable now.

"Work!" This struck Pengsy as hilarious, and he cackled. "Oh yeah, you bet I'm gon' be doing some work! When Jill comes, oh yeah baby, you bet your rotten dead ass there's gon' be some workin'! When a lady says she's comin' at one in the damn AM instead of waiting for the next day, there can only be one thing on her mind." He thrust his hips. "*Uh! Uh! Uh!* Yeah, yeah, baby. Now that's what I'm talkin' about!"

Each time someone had called over the past forty-eight hours, Pengsy either hadn't heard it over the music, was out to the store for supplies, or out cold. Only that afternoon had he noticed the answering machine blinking. Among those who left messages was Jill. She had called at three-thirty and understandably but wrongly assumed:

(You're at work still, I guess. I want you to know that I've had time to think. The problem is me, not you. You shouldn't be punished for my insecurities. I'll come tonight after work at one. I hope that's not too late. I know you stay up so... I hope that's okay.)

And Pengsy wrongly assumed that it wouldn't just be *okay* but downright groovy for her to find him lit up like Atlantic City and five times as fun. She might be sore at first, but then the nostalgia would get her, Jack Daniels would make her soft, Pengsy would make her wet, and give her a rocket-ride to Neverland of legendary proportions. It would be just like old times, wonderful decadent times when life was a party and nothing was serious, back before everything went wrong.

A new beginning.

The monkey was beyond blind now.

Its eyes were torn out.

Pengsy burst into laughter.

Eric was not laughing. He had been a party-pisser in life so why wouldn't he be beyond it. "I'm so disappointed in you." He shook his head and Pengsy's cheer frayed. "So

disappointed."

"Don't you start." Pengsy tried to smile, even faked a chuckle in the hope it would cue a real one, but Eric continued to shake his head soberly. "Come on now."

His next attempt at a chuckle turned into a growl when Eric did not crack a smile or speak. That silence, that serious silence bore into him.

(--ruin my good time, he's trying to ruin my good time, why does everybody want to ruin it, why, why, goddamn it--)

Pengsy felt himself going red and turned his face away, but it did no good.

Whenever the booze had a hold on him, every emotion came jumbo-sized. If they were too serious, smelled too much of reality, did not fall into the categories of rock-and-roll and everything-is-fine-here and happy-happy-joy-joy, he pushed it away. Couldn't handle it. Did not want it.

If he couldn't shake it or something wouldn't let him, it transformed into anger.

That *silence* wouldn't let him.

His temper roared up.

He whirled, lobbed the bottle which passed through Eric and shattered against the wall behind him, and Pengsy wound back a fist. "*I said don't you start!*"

Eric watched him blankly.

Pengsy's fist trembled violently over his shoulder.

"I'll *bust* your da--"

The skin on Eric's face began to split and bleed in a spreading rash, as if an invisible flock of malicious birds were pecking into the flesh.

"Shit." Pengsy's rage turned over to grief and shock that he had lost his head with his cousin. "Come on. You know I was kiddin'." A sob pushed out of him. "Stop that. Stop it."

"I died, Pengsy," Eric said with his dirt-clotted voice. "I

died and my cousin is throwing a party instead of making things right for me."

"It ain't like that!" His eyes burned with hot tears. "I'm sorry you're upset I went to drinkin' again. But you've gotta understand!"

Eric raised his brows over his pale bleeding eyes. He showed no expression, but Pengsy knew what Eric would be thinking, knew he *would* be disappointed after all the time Eric devoted to helping him get off the bottle and work through all his junkie thinking. That made Pengsy feel guilty, then angry at himself for feeling guilty, angry for being angry when he was supposed to be having a good time, and ANGRY that he was *angry* about being *ANGRY*, and it cascaded that way as it always did, a raging forest fire set off with one spark.

The voice that left his mouth was low, hoarse, the rising voice of a demon: "Go ahead and make it *a-a-a-a-ll about you*. Go ahead and bleed! But go do it somewhere else. Get on back to that box in the ground to feel sorry for yourself! This ain't about all that here! Everybody's gotta let loose sometimes. This is my time to do it! *My time* and fuck you if you don't like it! I said I'm sorry and that's that! *That's th-a-a-a-a-t!*"

Silence.

Pengsy exploded into a whirling frenzy of profanity and destruction. He kicked the stereo stand, kicked a cluster of empty bottles, launched one at the wall in a burst of shards, snatched up another and lobbed that too. He busted a table, knocked over a speaker that brayed static and blew. He launched a kick at his dresser. It slammed on its side. He wrenched the CD player off the stand, yanking out the wires but not the plug that caught when he lobbed it at Eric. It hurled, swung down and around from where the cord hitched on the corner of the stand, and crashed against his shin with a jolt of pain.

He pitched forward, went off-balance, stumbled back.

Tripped.

The bed footboard hammered the back of his head and knocked all the thoughts *out* for a long dazed moment.

"Don't apologize for what you *are*," Eric said.

Pengsy looked up, a beat away from launching off the floor.

"*A man*," Eric said, which was confusing, unexpected, and gave Pengsy pause. "Death lifts all the delusions of the living, Pengsy. There is only the truth. I'll give you that truth. If you'll hear it."

Pengsy turned his head, eyed him from the corner his wild eyes, and gave a nod.

"I'm disappointed you won't help me avenge my death, not that you're drinking." Eric said. The blood pulled back over his flesh, moving upward in defiance of gravity, returning to where it all came, the openings in the face that then sealed shut. "I was a victim of the lie too, and I'm so sorry that I became a pawn of it. So sorry I persuaded you to stop drinking. So very sorry."

"What?"

"All men drink, Pengsy. Every man worthy of being called a man does and does it a lot, because that's what it takes. There is no disease of alcoholism. The world is the disease and a real man takes his medicine. The world is full of things out to get you, crush you, beat you down, and if you stand there and take it, you're a sissy." At times Eric's voice sounded like Pengsy's. "Forget that word alcoholic. It only means you don't hide it as well, but all the *real men* drink. All the time." The words brought Pengsy to his feet. "The only thing that separates them is how... well... they conceal it."

Pengsy had always suspected this. He nodded gravely, vindicated, as Eric's voice went on, hit all his buttons, opened the gates that let in the full power of the movers in his

darkness, high voltage short-circuiting his soul.

A man gripped by one demon can be reached by them all.

"Oh how mean-hearted they have been. They're bullies that have *singled you out* and told you it was wrong to take your medicine so they could watch you squirm and suffer. All while they've told you what you feel is wrong, they've been taking their medicine. *What a fool that Padget is*, they say, and they *do* call you Padget behind your back. They all do. They all laugh at you. They've all been *laughing*."

(Padget Faggot Panzy Pengsy...)

(No, your name is not Patrick, it's Padget, I want you to erase this and write your name right there, P-a-a-a-dget Pengsy, Padget Pengsy--)

(Welcome to the real world! And in the real world you're a filthy drunk! Filthy drunk! You're never going to touch me again! Not ever again!)

(Pengsy, is there anything you want to share with the group today?)

(We held you and raised you as Padget and that's what you'll always be to us. We can't get used to calling you anything else. Do you understand, son? Do you understand?)

(Whath the mattlew Padget, ith the Panthy Pengthy gonna cry, cry Padget Pengthy, come on, cr-y-y-y you thithy)

"Your closest friend is a drunk. He hides it. He hides that the fact that he is not your friend at all. He hides what he has done..."

The thing that had taken the shape of Eric Pengsy hooked a thumb at the mirror.

Pengsy looked and saw his cousin Eric on the last day of his life. Under a blue sky, the afternoon sun threw his shadow, which chased him as he peddled through the hilly trails of southern Barksdale. The reflected trees scrolled on his sunglasses and faintly over his helmet. Gloves, blue jersey, spandex shorts with a fanny pack, Eric coasted down a narrow

bumpy path to Echo Valley Road.

"Now you're ready to see," said the demon voice, *"the truth of my demise."*

Eric rode out in a collision course with a jeep zooming with a trail of dust in its wake. With a split second to react, the driver hit the brakes. Before the jeep spun to the road shoulder, it grazed a tire of Eric's bike, sending the back one up and the bike out of control on the front tire. The bike hit the guardrail, started to flip, and launched Eric over it.

He tumbled down the cliff, screaming and arms flailing, and dropped headfirst into the rocks at the bottom.

Eric lay, still alive but badly hurt. Bleeding, dying.

The view, through what Pengsy had no doubt or reason to doubt was a window in time, rose up the cliff and zoomed in on the driver, who moseyed across the street.

Squinting, drunk, he looked over the railing and slugged down Budweiser from a bottle.

"That's a pisser." The driver watched while Eric died. *"Let's keep this between you and me, buddy,"* he said to the bottle of Bud. *"Wouldn't want nobody thinkin' we have a problem or we'll end up sissified like Padget."*

He laughed.

Pengsy stared.

His irises reflected Chad Hyman in the mirror.

Eyes blinked. Focused. Narrowed. Widened.

Brows arched down.

Pupils dilated.

Growing black holes to the wreckage of his mind--
--that burst into flames.

E I G H T E E N

ORCHESTRA OF THE FATES

1

Light took on a sour yellow cast as it filtered through the clouds that churned high and low through Sutton Valley. The day retreated in a rush of shadows, as if driven out by the rising wind that teased with cool edges and smelled of lake water. It gusted through the forest in a raucous symphony of rustling leaves and knocking branches, whistled around the gutters of the Hyman house and through the loose planks of the fence that enclosed the backyard. The wind chimes that ranged across a neighboring lawn were in a constant jangle, a sound no more harmonious than the riled twitter of the birds navigating the drafts that clashed and weaved over Chad Hyman's head.

The night fell hard on his heart as he tackled the last cord of wood. He had been at it ever since he woke from his short nap. He still felt tired, yet at the same time full of nervous energy and bad thoughts which he tried to channel out. He worked out the soreness that lingered in his muscles after spending a night hunkered against the hard walls of a holding cell, worked out all the things eating him with every fall of the ax and crash of the sledgehammer.

The heavy clang of the hammer-head on the ax in the most hardy of the lumber, the crackling rip of the wood, the almost musical thuds of the pieces as they toppled and settled, all of it was comforting. They were good sounds. Good magic. Always had been.

But the bad thoughts kept creeping back, returning as

reliably as Buck's monsters who haunted his room from the closet each night.

Over the past hours he had zoned out often, staring at nothing, staring at the business end of his huge sledgehammer, at the sky that scrolled clouds over a terrible world where people seldom got the good things they deserved and always got the bad things they didn't, a world filled with more horrors than what played out on the evening news, maybe more than what he saw in that weed-choked plot, in the mouth of that old freezer that was so much more than a freezer.

You know there's more, a wary voice inside kept reminding him. *There's what's behind it. There's the Grim.*

He didn't like to think about that or of all the people who found unthinkably horrible deaths there, especially Kirsten Dudley and her father William, who wouldn't have died if Chad had taken care of his business instead of running from it. The fact that he had warned William afterwards was of little comfort.

Coming from a man who sounded one-hundred percent off his nut, the warning meant nothing. William's death, unproven but believed in Chad's heart, weighed him down.

He knew something had to be done before someone else was hurt or worse. The only one left on the cul-de-sac was Betty Morgan, who might or might not be next on the dinner menu because she had been feeding them appetizers for god-knew-how-long. Could he take the chance that she might be? He had to ask himself how long he was willing to wait, how long before someone strolled through the neighborhood or went hiking through the woods, how long 32 Saybrook would remain vacant before there was a new tenant, a new Abby Arnell or William Dudley or little Kirsten, or god forbid several little Kirstens.

How long before he started forgetting again?

It had to be taken care of and Chad doubted Sam Blainey was coming to save the day. Sam wasn't going to climb out of Hoad's book, materialize in the real world somehow as the gibgoblins had, and bring the resolution that needed to happen.

But I'm no Sam Blainey, he thought. Not in this world or any other. I'm Chad Michael Hyman of 819 Hulls Hill Road in Barksdale, New York, where I'm a registered voter. I'm a 1988 graduate of Barksdale High School where I played football and could have bonked the prom queen but didn't. I've got a wife, a teenaged daughter, and a little boy who needs his daddy. I live, I breathe, I shit, I even play the lottery, and I can die too. I'm not a figment of some drunkard's imagination. I'm not a goddamned fiction.

Chad split the last piece of wood, cracked open another Budweiser which he emptied in one go, and stacked it all.

When he finished an unknown time later, he leaned the ax and sledgehammer against the wood.

Nothing more to do here.

There was no more wood. Considering there was enough stacked all the way around the deck in two high rows to last two winters, this was probably a good thing.

In the glow of the back deck lights, as the drafts whispered and howled and the plank door kept banging against the fence, he stood stiffly and felt lost.

So goddamned lost.

"What now?"

You know. You know.

Biting back the tremble that wanted to spread from his insides again, he pitched his head back and looked to the roiling sky. Clouds sailed the wind. They wandered, they rose, they fell, converged, parted ways, offering glimpses of the uppermost layer, a tattered curtain with gauzy holes to the

heavens where the stars shone through.

A flash on the horizon and low rumble from the distance reminded him of the approaching storm. Based on what little he caught about it on TV, it was going to be a boomer to remember. Then again, that was hours ago and the prognosis might have changed. The storm would probably fizzle into a petty shower or change its path, as most seemed to do.

He hoped it would, given that Buck didn't react well to thunderstorms. One good crash of thunder in the middle of the night might send Buck upright and screaming and quite possibly up for hours. Chad supposed that wouldn't matter. He knew *he* wouldn't be sleeping that night, one way or the other.

He looked away from the direction of the coming storm, started to walk, and stopped.

Reluctantly, he looked back. He was almost sure Donald Prater mentioned a thunderstorm that happened at the end of *The Gibgoblins*. That was all that came to Chad, other than the thought that the storm might be no coincidence, an absurd notion he tried to cast away.

Tonight is the night, his gut told him. *It has to happen tonight or it won't. This is your only chance.*

He collected the three beer bottles he emptied and went back into the house.

The clock read ten forty-seven PM, late for Buck being awake but not overly with it being summer.

Buck sat with Trish at the kitchen table in front of his dinner from earlier that Trish must have nuked after he complained of being hungry. A common event. Sometimes the boy didn't want to eat, refused upon penalty of an ear-shattering tantrum. Trish saved his food for when he wanted it, which was why Clingwrap was always on the grocery list. Buck hadn't been interested in eating that evening any more

than Chad had.

The plate of steak, rice, and beans which Chad forsook after he woke from his nap was still there.

Trish had that worn-down look which had become much too frequent. Clad in an extra long tee-shirt and her hair tied clumsily to one side, she hadn't said a word when he had told her that he was going out to chop wood for no good reason. She hadn't come out and nagged him. He reckoned she could tell he needed some space, and appreciated it.

"Daddy's back," she told Buck with a smile that began to fray when she looked up at Chad. "Do you feel better?"

"About?"

Trish shrugged a shoulder, eyes worried.

Chad shrugged too before he went to the sink and washed out the bottles. "What have you two been up to?"

"Yesterday we played games in Buck's room. Drew some pictures. Made some paper lanterns. What else did we do?"

He glanced at her. "Wow."

"I was feeling ambitious." Trish gave a sheepish smile. "Last night Buck slept in our bed while you were..." She hitched on that a moment. "Away. Buck's going to sleep in his room tonight though." She looked to him for confirmation, rising. "Right?"

"Yuh-huh."

When Chad walked around the table, bound for the living room, Trish came around the other side. To hug him, start a fight, he could only guess.

She leaned, asking quietly: "Is there a problem?"

The problem is you were wrong when you said there's no such thing as monsters, he thought and looked at their son, who babbled inaudibly and used his fork to move his peas into troops of five. *And Buck was right.*

Chad ruffled his hair.

"I mean a problem other than..." She waved her hands.

"The obvious. Are you okay?"

He brought an arm around her, pulled her close, and locked her lips in a kiss that was deep and genuine, unlike the smile he pulled together afterward. "I am."

She ran her fingers across his bristles. "You're days shy of having a beard. Are we taking the lumberjack thing a little too far?"

"Dunno about that."

"I wouldn't mind."

"I'll remember that. And you look bushed. Why don't you go lay down. I'll watch Buck, put him to bed."

"Are you sure?" She sounded more grateful than uncertain.

"Positive. Do you want me to jammy him up?"

"I'll do that. Thanks. Last night I barely..."

"It's okay."

"Maybe I'll read first."

Sure, you will.

"Okay." He kissed her hand, let it go, and went into the living room, where he settled into his chair.

What was on TV, he didn't know or care at first. His attention kept to the red bar at the bottom of the screen as it scrolled messages from the National Weather Service.

Severe thunderstorm warning. Estimated to grace Vineyard County just after midnight, the specter-and-spooks equivalent of high noon. Damaging winds with gusts in excess of 70 mph. Torrential rain. Dangerous cloud to ground lightning. Large hail. Conditions favorable to produce tornadoes. The works.

The only thing the message was missing was: BY THE WAY, HAMMER MAN, YOU WOULD HAVE TO BE A FOOL OR A HERO TO GO OUT IN THIS SHIT. GUESS WHICH ONE WE'VE GOT OUR CHIPS ON?

Finally in PJs, Buck returned to the living room soon after and played with his tractors and dump-trucks on the carpet, which had no shortage of snags from this.

Chad watched him slow down over the course of ten minutes, looking sleepy, and he rose when Buck laid down.

"Bed-time." Chad hoisted him up.

He carried Buck upstairs to his room, more willing to chance that the storm would wake him later than risk setting back their progress in getting him to sleep in his own room by putting him in the master bedroom from the get-go.

Chad knelt by his bed, tucked him in, and kissed him on the forehead. "Sweet dreams, buddy."

His eyes popped open.

"You can't go yet." He pointed. "Remember?"

Chad craned his head toward the closet door, eyeing it as warily as Buck did.

"I'm scared."

"*You?*" Buck asked, making Chad realize he had thought it out loud.

The cat's out of the bag now. Nice going.

"I'm scared to go in there like before." Chad thought of the terrible voice that came from the freezer and how it repeated his usual ketchup-and-fries bit.

Whether the freezer took the words from his head or *heard him* say it in that closet, he shuddered to think. He didn't want to go in there, no, because he could no longer say with certainty that Buck's monsters were more in his head than they were in the darkness of that closet.

"What if they gang up on me," he said.

Oh, that's weak. Weak.

"They won't, Daddy." Buck sat up, placing his hand on his arm. He didn't shield himself with the blanket. "They'll hide."

"Why hide?" he asked in a small voice, marginally aware

that he was asking the freezer the same question.

You mean the gibgoblins, he scolded himself. You do yourself no favors by only thinking of the damn freezer, no matter how much more wieldy that thought seems.

"You have to do it," Buck said, his voice taking on a whine that might soon translate to tears. "You're the only one who can do it."

Chad looked down, feeling ashamed and absurd.

You're having trouble dealing with the pretend ones. Not a good start to the night. Not a good start.

His gaze wandered the floor, passed over the pictures Trish and Buck crayoned, some admirable attempts by Buck to recreate the Spider-Man and X-Men posters on his wall, rambled past the paper lanterns and the construction paper and tape rolls and stapler and scissors and glue they used to make them, and landed on the closet again.

"You're the only one," Buck said, "cuz they're a-scared of you."

"Are they?" Chad blinked and looked at the pictures scattered on the floor again.

One looked to be Buck's attempt at himself and his old man, who happened to wear a cape.

"They're a-scared," Buck repeated. "They know Daddy gets always... I mean, Daddy--"

"Always gets the job done." Chad looked at him. "Daddy always gets the job done."

Buck nodded with a look of seriousness that came to adults but seldom children, pausing. "It's your job to beat up the monsters."

(Your job.)

Chad rose slowly, staring gravely at the closet, tightening fists, and he agreed.

"It is."

2

Halfway between his apartment and the home of Chad Hyman, at an intersection in the Barksdale boonies where houses were scarce, Pengsy ran into a problem that came in the shape of a Chrysler Concorde. He ran into it at seventy-five miles an hour with a thunderclap of collision, shrieking tires, and flurry of broken glass. The Concorde reeled on Norris Road, spit sparks from the rims of a popped back tire, swept its headlights over the back of Pengsy's car, which careened wildly across Garton Road, skidded, rolled into the trees and smashed against a tree so ancient and thick it barely trembled from the impact.

Pengsy blacked out, but only for moments.

He came to plastered against the ceiling, face pressed against it, wondering drunkenly how this was possible before it sank in that his car was not just totaled but upside down. He lifted his head, a heavy thing at first. He felt the dagger he brought pinned under his chest, the handle-edge pressing hard against his sternum, and didn't have the sense of mind to be thankful he hadn't landed differently.

His eyes focused on the spider-web fractures in the windshield beside him and moved his gaze out the broken window, where weeds swayed in the breeze. He smelled burned rubber, engine smoke, the beer he had been guzzling from the bottle behind the wheel, and gasoline. That last aroma was *not* a happy one when he thought of the hot battered engine and the cigarette he had been smoking which could now be burning anywhere.

There's a cocktail for ya. Beer, gasoline, and fire. That kind of rock and roll won't put you under the table. That'll put you under the ground with all the other crispy critters. Better get movin if you want to keep your date with everyone's

favorite handyman. He owes us blood.

"How bad are you?" asked Eric, heard but not seen.

When Pengsy moved, he expected pain of epic magnitude, but there was little, save for the sting of cuts from broken glass. He spat out a few teeth and ran through a quick inspection.

Arms, legs, knees, elbows, neck. Check, check, check, and check. Everything was fine here.

Congratulations, you passed. Here's your sticker and thank you for driving drunk.

The Pengsy machine was good to go and it did, as soon as Pengsy retrieved the dagger.

It wasn't until he pulled himself out of the wreck that his left arm began to sing. The joints ached like bad teeth. Banged-up, bruised, it must have had fractures, but nothing major. It was still usable. Just usable. That was okay. His stabbing arm was all he really needed.

He staggered through the weeds, up the incline of the ditch to the shoulder of Garton Road, and looked down the dark hill where it curved out of sight, running parallel to Hulls Hill Road. He had intended to park on Garton where Hyman's house would have been directly across the strip of forest, and go the rest on foot for a sneak attack. He now wished he had gone the direct route, as he would have been there by now, making Chad Hyman wish he had died at birth.

Pengsy took no notice to the maimed car just up the road, smoking with its emergency lights flashing, or the driver of that car until the man was fifteen feet away, limping and holding a wounded head.

"Hey. You all right?"

Slowly, very slowly, Pengsy turned his head--his flesh covered in blood from cuts. When he turned the rest of him and a lightning flash gleamed off the dagger in his grip, the

man from the Concorde stopped. The look on his face struck Pengsy as comical, but he did not smile or laugh, because the man had derailed his train of thought.

"Are you hurt?" the man asked uncertainly, glancing at the wreckage of Pengsy's car. "Is anybody else hurt?"

"Not yet." Pengsy took a step forward and the man took a step back. "Why? Do you *want* some hurt?"

The man was shaking his head, backing.

"*Cuz I've got it!*" Pengsy's eyes grew as he advanced. "I've got it to give and maybe I oughta! You did a bad thing! A bad, *bad* thing by gettin' *in my w-a-a-a-a-y!*"

The man turned and broke into a hobbling run, as much of a run as he could manage with a hurt leg.

Pengsy impended on him. "*I turn into a pumpkin at midnight and you mighta made me late for the ball, mother fucker! Late for the goddamn b-a-a-a-ll!*"

The man kept going toward his car, showing every indication of fear and saying nothing, and that was the best thing he could have done.

The red beast received its due respect.

If the man had gotten in Pengsy's face about what happened or started going on about insurance information, Pengsy would have left him thinking about his wife and sons as he wriggled and bled on the road with his throat cut open, because Pengsy didn't have the time for any of that shit.

He was running out of time. He felt it.

The wreckage of his car sprouting flames to his side, the dark horizon flashing behind him and rumbling and drumming like the percussion section of nature's orchestra, Pengsy stomped down the hill in what verged on a strut.

Eric walked stiffly out of the trees ahead. "By the time you get there, he will be gone." He pointed off in another direction. "Go through the woods. I'll lead the way. Hurry. There's a car coming soon. More delays. You might make it in

time if you hurry. You must hurry."

Pengsy picked up the pace, holding the dagger tight, and headed through the trees.

"Where?" he kept asking. His feet trudged through mud, branches slapped his face, leaves slashed across the wounds of his face with white slivers of pain that kept him alert, kept him riled and primed for righteous action, and he moved through the swaying trees and the howling drafts of the darkness which would lead him to the animal he hunted and would attack on sight. "Where am I going? Where will he be? Where? *Where?*"

Always a step ahead, Eric led the way to destiny.

3

Joe Rendell never considered himself a good prognosticator of things to come. A lifelong advocate of the future being "what you and The Almighty make it", he didn't believe that the future was already written, much less that man could catch glimpses of those later pages. After all that had happened, he certainly wouldn't have wanted to. If there had existed a single possibility inside him that he could have foreseen and prevented the death of his only child Deborah in a random accident or the disappearance of her daughter Kirsten, his only grandchild, Joe's mind would have capsized and settled to the stony bottom of a despair from which no human soul could hope to recover.

His mind wasn't doing so well as it was.

With William inexplicably gone and Joe alone in his home where the vacancies were so marked, he had broken down that evening and had a cry, one that was overdue but he wouldn't have allowed if he had been home with Mary. It was a good cleansing cry that did not end in sorrow, only visited it on the

way to a place of hope.

Joe was brought back to his grounding by that undying faith and a powerful feeling that came from another place, a *knowing* deep down he couldn't explain.

Something was about to happen.

Something important.

Ever the optimist, he banked on it being a good thing and spent the evening in a state of waiting. For the phone to ring with news about Kirsten or William. For the sound of Castillo's engine. For a knock on the door or it swinging open to William who returned from wherever he had gone to sort himself out.

The night grew late and fat with doubts that any of those things would happen, yet *the feeling* strengthened. The anticipation, that waiting and knowing, ran all through him like a charge. However strong, it was irrational. He told himself it was probably nothing and would keep him up for no good reason.

Since the day Kirsten disappeared, Joe had been popping an extra sleeping pill. Against the advice of his doctor, he had been taking them nightly for years, mostly to ensure he could fall into a deep sleep that would carry through till morning. Otherwise he slept too light and woke too early. He couldn't count the times before the pills he found himself wide awake at 4 AM, unable to go back to sleep and doomed to be tired and mostly useless by seven at night.

Ignoring Mary's voice in his head advising not to, Joe took an extra pill that night. He wanted an early start and hoped against being awakened by the storm on its way. Otherwise, the weather warnings didn't impress him much. The storm would be a glorified noisemaker and probably not much else.

He made sure all the windows were closed.

That was all.

The pills began to take hold while he watched the news at

eleven. He saw the beginning of David Letterman and he closed his eyes during a commercial.

Twenty minutes jumped on the clock, now a hair short of midnight.

Already in his robe and pajamas, he fidgeted with the bed he made himself on the couch with pillows, a sheet, and an afghan. After he settled into the couch, he realized he had left the remote to the TV on the chair, but he was too comfortable to get up and grab it to shut off the TV.

Soon after Joe fell into a hazy dream, the image blurry at times as if seen through smudged glass.

All he would remember of it was seeing his childhood friend Gary Hoad on the front lawn outside with Betty Morgan. It wasn't night. He stood in the sun of morning, clad in his white dress shirt and trousers with suspenders, arms motioning, face serious, mouth moving. They were talking.

Over a loud but damp drone noise that could have been a helicopter, Joe could not hear Gary or Betty, who was not young as she was when Joe was a boy and friends with Gary.

It was the Betty from now, wearing a paisley dress with an apron, sunhat, and gardening gloves.

4

Late that night--

"...and the night before, tommyknockers, tommyknockers, knocking at the door..."

Betty sung rhymes to Annie and though Annie never joined in, it made Betty feel good the same way the smiley faces did. She drew them on things for the same reason that Chad Hyman had once left himself notes everywhere.

So she would remember what she was prone to forget.

Her mother used to say, *"Whenever you feel blue,*

remember to smile is all you really need to do," and those words from her childhood stuck with her as devoutly as all the stories her father and Grandpa Cottle used to tell about Black Peter and the Tommyknockers.

The dark clouds still hanging in her internal atmosphere had caused the smileys to multiply that day, the most recent drawn on the bathroom mirror, but they lingered on a level that wasn't conscious, because she had felt like dynamite ever since she told off Roy.

She could only imagine what he told the boys, his wayward apostles, but found she didn't care how well she ranked with scum anyway. That Danny Rothsomething used to mow Abby's yard and give Betty dirty looks as if she were a wicked witch of Oz. Richie Winslow was a bad-mannered kook who treated his Ella badly. Then there was that drunkard Ed Hoad who wrote all those stories about gremlins and evil elves that lured the unwary into dark places to gobble them up. When Roy had told her about that man's devil muses, Betty said that Ed Hoad would find himself doing the same thing on Judgement Day as everyone else who wrote such garbage: *treading fire* in one of Hell's lakes.

Danny, Richie, Ed. *Larry, Curly, Moe.*

She didn't know the other *boys* personally, but presumed they shared plenty in common with the dirty dogs they kept company with. She wouldn't feed those strays any more. They'd had more than they deserved of her good cooking.

They used her, used her like a--

The smiley face on the basement door reminded her to put on a happy face, and she did as she climbed the stairs into the kitchen. She carried a plate to the counter, tipped it, spilled crumbs into a bowl that she planned to empty on the lawn the next morning, and set the plate in the sink.

She headed through the dining room, headed for bed, and a voice gave her a start.

"*Betty*," Roy said from the crucifix--the figure nailed on the cross coming to life, looking up with Roy's head, which had pointed ears and red eyes. "Me'n the boys need help."

"Not another scrap!"

"Not that," Roy said, while the demon apostles glared from the frame of The Last Supper, none noticing the army amassing in their back yard.

Beyond the doorway and windows, far in the background of the storm-haunted landscape, figures were lining up.

"There's trouble. Trouble on the way. A bad man comin'. He might ruin everything."

"*What?*" she asked, puzzled.

"Me'n the boys are in trouble!"

"I don't..." She averted her eyes, distracted by the sound of an engine. "I don't owe you anything."

"You can have Annie. We give up our claim. But you gotta stop the man who's comin'. Get the gun. You know where it is."

Betty did. It was in Roy's top dresser drawer beneath the underwear that had been neatly folded in there for over forty years. "Are you crazy? I don't like guns."

"You gotta, sweet-cakes. Or all may be lost."

"It is late, Roy!" Betty scowled, then remembered. And smiled. "It is almost midnight and I am *going* to bed."

"Not if you want to keep Annie."

She looked at him sidelong, narrowing her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"She's been bad for not goin' to sleep. She's bein' bad. Annie's bein' bad. Didn't you hear the knock-knock-knockin' on your door? Knock-knock-knockin' on your door. Late last night and the night before."

Betty's mouth pulled into a tight O of terror.

"He's gonna take Annie. You gotta stop him! He's gonna

take our baby. You can't let him take our baby!"

Oh my god I can't lose her again! she thought, panicked at once, and considered the gun.

"It's one of those bad things that come for kids in all those rhymes. It's the Tommyknocker Man. Stop him. Stop the Tommyknocker Man."

She took four steps.

And froze.

Her face tightened and she whirled, shaking the scolding finger. *"Oh-h-h-h no you don't.* You're trying to trick me again. Not this time. Oh no, never again are you going to get the best of me, mister. You'd better cross me off your list."

"And you'd better help us," a voice growled that didn't sound like Roy's at all. "Or you'll be sorry. You. Must. Do. Something."

Before walking down the hall, she looked over her shoulder. "I'll say a prayer for you. *Pop.*"

N I N E T E E N

PRELUDE TO THE STORM

1

A cigarette winked like a demon's eye behind the wheel of the jeep parked at the mouth of the cul-de-sac. The only other light came from a basement-level window of the Morgan house, from above as lightning arrowed through the sky, and from behind the trees across Saybrook Road, from the direction of the storm front that had begun to take over the sky, ushering in a cauldron of volatile clouds that seemed to give off their own eerie light.

The air low to the ground smelled of ozone and had become utterly still in contrast to all the activity above.

This would change soon enough.

For now, Chad sat in the calm and listened to the thunderheads rumble and boom, the chatter of angry gods that had plenty to say and no doubt big plans for Sutton Valley.

Chad had plans too. Battle plans for a war he knew had to be waged on more than one front.

The cigarette smoke hung and wisped around his head. He had a second cigarette tucked behind an ear and a third in his breast pocket. They were Camels. *His brand.* They *had to be* in order to have any meaning, which was what he realized when he had motioned to plunder the Marlboro Lights from Trish's purse on the way out.

Instead, he stopped by a gas station and picked up a pack of full-flavor Camels.

From which he drew three.

The rest of the pack lay somewhere on Pond Road now, destined to be blown around in storm winds before the rains drenched it and carried it off to oblivion.

His first cigarette almost expended, he flung it.

He slid the second out from behind his ear, ignited it with a zippo which he tucked into a jeans pocket, and performed this ritual not with the mind-set of a man appeasing demons but summoning them to be destroyed.

There would be one more cigarette after this, only one, and Chad knew--with such resolve and certainty that the Pengsys and Ed Hoads of the world could hardly conceive of it much less imagine--that it would be final.

That demon would be forever slain.

The strength of that knowing coursed through him in a channel of raw power, and he took the first step.

His headlamps blazed, thrust the shadows back across the cracks and snags of the battered pavement, swept them down the driveway into the bank of black where the freezer waited and anything might happen.

The console lights came on, casting his grim face in their pale yellow glow, and the engine hitched with a rusty groan before it engaged, smoothing out to a healthy rumble.

Smoke rising through his gaze, he pulled it in through his pulsing cigarette and vented it from his nose.

"Thought you could hide from me," he said. "You were dead wrong." He gripped the gear, shifted. "And now... I'm gonna getcha."

His foot slammed the gas pedal to the floor.

The jeep roared forward, speedometer climbed, tires chirped and flung stones. Shadows retreated into the trees as the headlights brightened to max. Chad hot-boxed his cigarette. Kept the high beams angled between the spot he marked in memory. Gazed with wild eyes. Closed in fast on the target he knew was there but did not see in the growing

light of the clearing.

Whipping past William's car, the jeep leaped off the pavement into the weeds where Chad felt the force, whiplash, heard the thunderclap *CRUNCH!* of impact.

Visible on contact, the freezer buckled as the jeep forced it onward, shredded the rusted-out bottom along the ground like black toast raked on a cheese-grater while the door flailed itself to pieces and the top half bowed from the breach in its rotten hull.

Tires gripped and ripped, fanning weeds and dirt.

The freezer kept going. It tumbled another ten feet, broke apart in a flurry of debris, and settled. The headlights threw jagged shadows of its ruins across the forest edge.

"Shame on you for foolin' me once."

Puffing thoughtfully on his cigarette as the night air moved in jerks and cool bursts, he took in the remains that he half expected to magically reform into what it had been.

He did not step out.

His eyes scanned the trees that were dotted with traces of red from the paint gun, settled on twin trees with mirrored bark formations and spatter shapes, found another set beside it as lightning flashed, and he ran a measurement in his head.

He backed up onto the pavement, up the driveway till he lined up with the door to the house at 32 Saybrook, where he should have noticed the glow of the TV on the picture window drapes but did not.

He spent a minute backing and forwarding the jeep, positioning, aiming his missile on wheels.

"But fool me *twice...*"

While he charged the clearing a second time, he held the wheel rock still and had no doubt that he drove as straight as a beam, despite his eyes that argued that the wheels were pulling to the right as if from bad alignment.

Again he smashed into a freezer, undoubtedly the right one. The jeep thrust it forward as before.

The rust-box lurched, dented and flaked, but held.

He did not take his eyes off it as he backed up for clearance, grabbed his giant sledgehammer, and stepped out into the breeze that felt cold against his sweaty face.

"Chaaaaaad," said the nightmare voice, which twisted and morphed into that of Chris Purvis. *"Deadsville's been waiting such a long time. It's wanted you from the beginning. It wanted you. That's what this has all been about. You. And now your time has come. Time for Atropos to c-u-u-u-t."*

This quaked Chad's nerves, but not his resolve.

He had expected voices, just as he expected the door to fly open any moment with a terrible sight. He was ready for anything, whatever it could dish out, but no matter what happened, he would get the job done.

And he would not blink.

"You cannot end forever," rasped a new voice, perhaps a truer voice. *"You cannot move the movers."*

"That time has passed." He pulled from the cigarette and spat it out. "Your relocation program has expired."

"I see Buck, Chaaad," the voice said, causing him to clamp his teeth. "From the closet. Leave us now or we'll pull poor *widdle Bucky-wucky's stuffing* out. *We will. We want to, too.*"

Whatever effect that threat was meant to have, anger took the place of fear and Chad advanced, more determined. Closer. The breeze against the side of his face cut off. Closer still. The breeze returned.

Little more than a yard away, his feet stopped.

Both hands gripped the handle, held the hammer out, and he backed up to give charging room.

Again, the breeze frayed.

(There's a gap in the wind, gap in the wind, gap...)

His eyes blinked.

"But first we'll rip out yours," the voice said. "We'll eat it up and we're always hungry. Always hungry."

Planting one foot forward, he mentally ran through motions in the backyard of his inner world and at the same time concentrated on memories of chopping wood in his backyard in the outer world, burying the ax in the lumber, driving it through with the hammer, stacking, drinking Buds. He projected those reels on the screen of his mind, and did it hard. He encircled his mind with it like a wall.

Chad brought the sledgehammer high.

Wound it back.

Moved forward.

Shame on the both of us.

He whirled from the false freezer and lunged the other way, swung at an angle, swung with everything he had.

The hammer *smashed* through the side of THE FREEZER, punched a hole, ripped it wider when Chad yanked it out. An inhuman shriek split his ears. It shook the air the way a subwoofer does as the sky cracked with light. It shook his insides, seemed to shake the ground that the freezer rocked drunkenly on.

A wriggling nest of arms rushed out the freezer door, which whipped open, Chad kicked back the way it came, and belted the arms with a burst of shrieks and mad giggles.

"Rrrrrrrrrrrrrgh!" Chad rammed the freezer.

His shoulder busted through the rot. Crusty shards stabbed and sliced as the whole thing toppled on its side.

It hit the ground hinges-down with the clattering crash one might expect from an ancient tool-chest dropped from a rooftop. The door slammed against the ground, busting a hole in the middle with a spatter of jagged wedges and dust.

Slimy arms with gray skin and black nails groped out from the opening, swiped at both ends, swiped at nothing

because Chad stood behind the freezer now.

"Sam Blainey. Eat your heart out."

He raised the hammer high.

Thunder crashed and from that sound roared a new one that skyrocketed in volume, the ferocious chord of a train blaring its horn. White light flooded the clearing and transmuted it into a railroad crossing in Sumner Bay where the freezer lay diagonally on the gleaming rails which Chad stood between, booted feet planted on ties, face turning toward the hot blinding headlight that rushed him like a comet launched from the screaming toll of Hell's bells.

Chad locked in place and stared wide-eyed into the light, where he glimpsed a figure charging at him. The shape of a man with a blade was all his mind registered the instant before he swung the hammer a split second too late.

It whooshed over the head of the attacker who thrust his head down, leaped, plowed into Chad's midsection with enough force to send them both flying over the freezer, all while the train roared through them in a phantom flurry.

The sledgehammer sailed astray.

Chad hit the ground and the crazed man crashed on top of him with a razor sharp dagger that Chad recognized as well as that man's face, *his friend's face*, which the jeep headlights illuminated with every side-to-side snap of his head, which was battered and bloody and ripped up as if from some accident.

Pengsy flailed, screamed babble, struggled to free his dagger-wielding arm from Chad's grip, thrashed with swinging runnels of snot and bloody drool.

"Pengs-e-e-e," Chad growled, struggling, confused.

"*Killer, you killed him, you killed him*," Pengsy screamed and chanted with a voice that frayed in a falsetto that was mad and hoarse. "*Who's the sissy! Killer! This death's for you, killer! For yo-u-u-u-u!*"

What doubt Chad had that Pengsy wasn't there--that this was another elaborate gibgoblin ploy--fled his mind at the slip and slash of the dagger along his jaw, which stung too mightily to be anything but real.

Pengsy cackled with bursts of whiskey breath that told Chad in an instant that Pengsy was under the influence of more than the gibgoblins. In reckoning why his friend was there and trying to kill him, it was the only thing that made sense. Pengsy was never more paranoid and gullible than while loaded to the gills.

"You let them in your head." Chad took charge.

He pushed, slammed his knee between Pengsy's legs, offering a stunned moment when Pengsy dropped resistance. He belted Pengsy in the face with the pommel of his own dagger, jammed his leg beneath Pengsy while he kept a vice-grip on his wrist, pushed him up, and flipped him off.

Pengsy rolled, slammed against the ground in a dazed sprawl of splayed legs, but managed to keep the dagger.

"You damn fool!" Chad scrambled to his feet. "They got you to drink, didn't they! *They got you to drink and you let 'em in your head!*"

Pengsy jerked upright, snapped his head violently toward Chad, and let out a moan that turned into a growl. He bore little resemblance now to the man Chad knew and considered the closest friend he had, would do anything for with the secure knowledge that the sentiment was mutual. The mad creature that gazed at him now was beyond the Pengsy that Chad knew in the absolute worst of times.

He can't be seeing me, but someone else, his father, his goddamned AA group leader, somebody else, anybody else.

Chad lifted his hands. "Pengsy..."

His chest heaved and eyes grew more wild.

"Think about what you're doin'," Chad said. *"Think!"*

Face bloody and dirty, lip curled up in a snarl over a mouth with missing teeth, his eyes full of fire, Pengsy surged off the ground and charged with a cry of rage.

"Don't make *me...*"

The dagger rushed.

Chad blocked the attack with an arm and snapped a punch that crashed so hard into Pengsy's face that he heard something crack.

"Hurt you," he finished. "Goddamn it!"

Pengsy staggered to the side, legs barely keeping him up, head tottering as if on a busted spring before it snapped crazily from side to side again.

"*Damn you. It's Chad!*"

"*Guuuuuuh.*" He lunged and slashed.

Chad jumped back, tripped over the head of his sledgehammer, stumbled backward, unaware from all his attention being fixed on Pengsy that the freezer lay just behind him and too off-balance to stay on his feet when Pengsy dove into him.

Down they both went, but not onto the ground.

They landed on the freezer door, which splintered and shed more rust under the slam of their weight.

Chad struggled with Pengsy, who drove him in deeper, pinned him there in the gaping opening of the overturned freezer, the mouth of *the Grim*. Terror ran through him and blasted out of him in a scream.

Pengsy wound back the dagger, pitched back his body, struck the edge of the freezer with his head which busted through it. His feet shoved him forward in a burst of reflex. He went over Chad, partway through the window into *the other place* while Chad tried to escape, scrambled over the door and several feet of weedy earth before he hitched at the ankle where *something* had taken hold.

(*Oh god OH GOD oh god they've got me...*)

Chad looked sharply back and saw *it* was Pengsy, half in the darkness and screaming, the sound echoing in the other place that Chad absolutely positively *did not* want to visit.

Pengsy's scream went up in treble and the strength of the pull on Chad's leg became enormous, as if *something* was pulling Pengsy or he had been on the edge of a cliff and now hung off it over...

Over what? Chad thought madly. *Gibgoblin-Land. That's what. He's gonna pull me in it too. Oh god save me he's gonna pull me in too...*

Chad was dragged backward. "Oh, no." He groped for anything to hold onto. "N-n-n-no."

Backward, backward.

Weeds ripped and dirt collected under his nails that dug channels in the ground. "Padg-e-e-e-t!"

A hand slid along the handle of the sledgehammer and seized it. Half delirious with fear, kicking his free leg in a frenzy, trying in vain to pound a hole in the ground with the hammer to catch himself with, Chad felt his belly scraping against the rim of the freezer.

The pull on him more fierce, Chad dragged quicker.

The hammer head caught on the freezer door--now little more than a frame of rusty jags.

"*Come o-o-n,*" he pulled and felt like a man stretched in a torture device. His heart leaped at a jerk in tension. "*Hold. Don't you dare... Don't you fargin...*"

His eyes bulging, his face a writhing twisted caricature of horror, Chad stared down the hammer and felt what remained of the dilapidated door giving.

"Oh son of..."

It burst at the pressure point in a plume of rust dust.

His view of the clearing, his jeep and the swaying weeds in the strobe of lightning, fell away from his eyes like a

window to reality dropped into the black throat of some terrible well.

Still in his grip, the hammer scraped.

It pulled out of the world and into the darkness.

"A b-i-i-i-i-i-i..."

Into the Grim.

2

Joe Rendell did not wake easily, but that had been the idea of popping the sleeping pills.

The rumble of the jeep engine and all the ruckus that followed, as loud and jarring as it all would have been on an average night, hardly competed with the god-pounding outbursts of the storm. Even beneath its perpetual bassy roar and ear-splitting crashes and crackles of thunder, there lay a blanket of noise, woven by the wind and the television with its weather warning beeps.

Yet some of the *wrong* sounds found their way to Joe, entering deaf ears but carrying on, wafting through the black of his conscious into the active region beneath that buzzed with signals and dreams.

Finally Joe stirred.

For an unknown time, he lingered in a no-man's land where the part of him still asleep tried to coax back down the other half that was awake and growing suspicious of the noises outside.

Unable to move at first, he pulled himself up on the couch and regained the motor function to stand and approach the window.

He moved the drapes, winced at a flash of lightning that struck downtown in a ruler-straight shaft, and scanned the yard as raindrops rolled down the picture window.

His gaze kept visiting the pavement behind William's car

and a subtle red glow that came from a source out of eyeshot from that window.

In order to see it, Joe had to go to the bathroom and crank open the window. His face pressed against the screen, he saw the clearing and the dark shape that he could not identify which lay in the headlights of a vehicle that idled there, well off the pavement. Driver door open, engine running and trailing exhaust into the wind, it was a jeep.

Oh Lord, I know that car, he thought with rising alarm.

It belonged to Chad Hyman, the handyman who had phoned William talking craziness, the number one person of interest in Kirsten's disappearance, a man who surely had no good reason to be there in the late hours of a stormy night.

Most troublingly, Joe did not see him, which meant he could be anywhere.

What if he did have something to do with Kirsten. God forbid, what if he had something to do with William. And now he's here. He's here.

His heart quickened, hammered in his ears.

Joe left the bathroom, locked the doors, and hurried to the phone to call Deputy Castillo.

T W E N T Y

HOAD'S GRIM

1

Pulled through the Grim door and over a ledge where the sledgehammer hitched again at the head like a well-meaning friend trying to stop the inevitable, Chad convulsed in a machine-gun discharge of energy that ripped through his mind and body, blinding flashes of white light that illuminated nothing and heat that pulsed through him in jarring contrast to the cool air he fell through when his sweaty hands slipped off the hammer handle.

The fall wasn't long but seemed to last forever.

Not knowing where he would land, not knowing *if* he would land but instead fall through a bottomless abyss that would keep his screams its eternal secret from the world he left far behind, he plummeted through black.

2

Chad and Pengsy crashed like bombs into a scrap heap of carnage with blasts of pain and upbursts of bones that rattled hollowly when they showered back down.

Stunned and mercifully numb at first, Chad could only tense as he heard the hammer slip off the ledge above.

It *whooshed* as it hurtled down, unseen, with the power to bash his face into his brains, an ironic end to The Hammer Man who almost hoped it *would*. He might find a death no kinder in the place he was now in.

But the hammer punched into the heap beside him with

wet snaps of bones and a splash of matter that did not land with bone chatters but *splats* and gelatinous *plops*.

Something landed on his face that made him think of noodles, and noodles were absolutely okay. Remnants of a Betty Morgan casserole is all it was. He tried to keep that firmly in mind when he wiped it from his face, but the smell of it did not lie.

The smell of decomposition, the clingy horrible stench of *death*, climbed over him as it had the day they found Abby Arnell rotting on the floor. The death smell climbed inside him, down to the pit of his stomach, turned him inside out.

Vomit rushed up his throat and he snapped his face to the side, letting it out.

When he finished, he resisted the powerful urge to run. Haste would get him killed at the clawed hands of the things that made this horrendous pile of remains, then he would be added to the collection.

He heard stirring all around, scraping sounds, wet slithering sounds, from how close Chad couldn't tell as the sounds echoed all throughout the hollow which he could not yet see.

He groped for the hammer or something stable, whichever he found first.

"Pengsy?" he whispered.

His hand found a ribcage. He wrenched it away, twitched, gasped a big breath of air so foul it murdered the scream rising in his throat.

The odors beneath the death smell were no more pleasant. Sulfury, rank, coppery, sour, sooty, the smells tainting the air could have been the result of a giant that gorged itself on rotten meat and rancid hard-boiled eggs, gobbled down the contents of an ashtray, washed it down with mold-laden liquor, and threw it all up into the Grim, threw up

until bile turned to blood.

Chad pitched to the side and did some more throwing up of his own, incapacitated by the gut-wrenching act and all the while *terrified* that the gibgoblins were creeping up on him.

Gagging, gritting his teeth from the pain of bone shards spiking into him, he jammed his hand in his pocket and produced his zippo.

It chimed as he opened it, rang out in a full echoing note that lingered, and the stirring
(of the gibgoblins)
stopped.

Chad sensed a kind of wariness in the silence, but it surely had nothing on the terror he felt.

Still he brought himself to a stand, a shaky one on a heap that shifted with every slight move. Drawing short breaths through his mouth, trembling uncontrollably in revulsion of the gunk he felt roll down his clothes and slither warmly down his arm, revulsion of the mess he knew surrounded him, of the mere image of it in his mind which probably did no justice to what was hidden in the black, he asked himself a question that was not rhetorical.

Do you really want to see it? It might be better not to see it. Better not to see THEM. The darkness might be so much better.

He struck the flint wheel of the zippo and the flame brought light to the nightmare and life to shadows.

Piled around him were bones picked clean, bones with rotten tufts of meat, limbs, bloody clothes ripped to rags, a miscellaneous junk-drawer hodgepodge of gore splattered artifacts, and just within the reach of the shifting lighter light lay all that remained of William Dudley, a skeletal bust connected to a half-eaten head with one blank eye staring in dreadful accusation.

Wanting to scream again, puke again, or both, he scanned

for the hammer and went rigid when a figure rose in front of him.

Bloody hair hanging in matted sheafs over a dead face half gone, skull exposed, eyes pulsing white orbs, Chris Purvis gaped the rotten black orifice that was his mouth in a gigantic grin.

"Welcome to Deadsville."

Chad listed back from the apparition, as if about to fall over, faint dead away.

He was winding back a fist.

It smashed into the face with authority.

The force of the blow sent *it* flying in a tumble of limbs that were no more human than the mewling noise it made when it disappeared into the shadows with a sick splashing sound that made Chad wonder.

The stirrings kept distance, which Chad took as more than a good thing. It was empowering.

"That's right you bast--" His voice hitched on a gag that he pushed down. *"Bastards!"* The word echoed all around him as if from a platoon of buddies cheering in agreement. "I ain't gonna stand here and let you make a mess of me! I've come to *make a mess of you!*"

As doubtful as that scenario seemed with limited light, limited lighter fluid, and limited knowledge of how tough a customer a gibgoblin was, not to mention how many there might be, Chad indulged himself with the hero fantasy.

It was all he had.

"I'm gonna pound yas till there's nothin' left!" He tried hard to sound strong, but the shudder wouldn't leave his voice. "Hear me?" His gaze fell on the handle of the hammer and he went for it, wide eyes sweeping around him. "Pound you into..."

A skull dislodged under his foot, which slipped.

Chad dropped into the heap to the waist and his heart all but stopped when he blundered the zippo.

He snapped his hand to snatch it back out of the air, and knocked it away instead.

It tumbled down an incline of bones, hitched, dropped into a cranny, all but dispelling the light for a terrible moment...

Before the *next* terrible moment when the flame ignited a shredded skein of bloody clothes long dried. The flames spread, branched off into channels through the pile, and one channel approached Chad as if drawn to him.

He grabbed the sledgehammer, swung hard, and batted away a cluster of bones and burning rags, which rippled through the air and off the heap, landing below with the promise of returning him to the pitch black where he was unquestionably a gory death waiting to happen.

Then came a massive *whump* of ignited fumes and the resulting uproar of flames. They shot thirty feet toward the craggy ceiling and roared outward in a shockwave that singed Chad's brows and bristles, felt like it flash-cooked his face, and might have scorched his eyes blind if he hadn't shielded them with his arm.

The airborne fumes having been expended in one fell swoop, the flames burned in pockets scattered through the Grim--now illuminated by firelight in its grisly wonder.

The enormous cavern was chiseled out of what looked more like tarnished bone than rock, despite the rock-like formations. Springs of blood and filth fed into the pool at the bottom, causing the many slicks snaking on what had to be mostly alcohol, given the strong liquor stench and the flames that rippled along the surface between the slicks and jumped when they thinned. In random lunges, the fire captured more territory of the shallow lake on which the heaping jumble of remains was a macabre island.

Stranded there, Chad was no more comforted by the

lifting of the darkness than of seeing that most of the remains were of animals--some possibly from the woods but most undoubtedly from Betty Morgan's oven--as there was no questioning the house favorite.

The human creme de la creme.

He *did* question why he was not afraid, as if the fire-flash had barbecued the terror meter in his brain or this vision of Hell overloaded it, shorted it out and left his emotions in a retarded state of detachment.

Enjoy it while it lasts. Just you wait and see. Once it's gone, you'll find yourself as insane as a lot of folks have pegged you for. Maybe more. Maybe you're already there and just don't know it. Chew on that bone, buddy.

Fifteen or so feet away, Pengsy started screaming, not in fright but in whatever rage or madness had inspired him to try to kill Chad before their tumble into the Grim.

However hard to believe Pengsy could be oblivious to the scene around them, Chad could tell he was and could tell he was hurt, as Pengsy struggled to free himself from the nightmare salad of rotting flesh and bone he was mired in.

All probably for the best.

For now, Pengsy wasn't *a* danger or *in* danger, at least no more than Chad was, not *yet* anyway.

As his screams turned to heaves and rounds of vomiting, Chad only afforded him glances.

His attention was on the gibgoblins, who were all around, the closest ones he saw still at a distance and reluctant to close in given recent developments.

How long they would be deterred by the fire, Chad didn't know. What might have happened if he hadn't dropped the zippo, he didn't want to know, but had a fairly good idea.

Forty-some feet away, a half dozen paced on an outcropping like ornery children. Their gaping mouths were

full of teeth, black eyes full of spite. Skin gray, ears hooking up the sides of heads thrust between shoulders, tusks jutting from their elbows, they flexed their claws in front of them as they moved. They walked hunkered forward and swinging their bodies from side to side on their bony haunches and awkward legs that ended in three hoof-like claws. Lizards, apes, elves, biblical demons, they could have been test-tube mutants of all four.

If only there were just six.

In the background Chad saw *them* grouped in cave entrances, perched on ledges and clefts, climbing handle-like protrusions to higher perches, peering through grot-holes, bickering, scheming, fighting, dismembering and devouring their own--alive, struggling, giggling at their own ends.

They were abominations to the eyes and mind.

Abominations unto themselves.

Dozens, a hundred, more, the gibgoblins bayed and giggled as if from a stadium of the mad.

This is what Hell looks like, he thought numbly.

"I should have read that goddamned book..."

Covered in gore and filth he didn't want to think about, Chad looked up toward where he had tumbled in.

Twenty-some feet above, three gibgoblins returned his gaze. The middle one looked different from the others. Taller, meatier, with strange dangling growths under its choppers as if three unnamable worms had burrowed and lodged to its jaw in a pitchfork formation that looked vaguely beard-like, it could have been the leader.

If those rabid creatures could have such a thing.

They sneered from where they hunkered, leaning over the narrow ledge that ran from a cave opening to the Grim entrance--or for his purposes now, the *exit*.

Chad couldn't see it from where he stood below. He knew it had to be there all the same, just as he knew he couldn't get

to it from where he was.

One of the caves branching off must hook back around to it, he thought, dreading. I'm going to have to go through the caves where they might be waiting to rip me apart in the dark.

The firelight wasn't going to last in the main cavern, much less reach into the caves. Though the flames strewn throughout the heap had grown, cooking rotten flesh and spreading with flare-ups along rags and dead hair, the fire straddling the surrounding liquid filth had begun to weaken. Diluting the light around the cavern edges, it drew the shadows and encouraged gibgoblins to encroach.

Those on the outcroppings at his level drifted to the edges, not as wary, and groups navigated the walls in search of good launching points. The terror returned to him with a rising tremble and sinking feeling of doom in his belly that bore down like a black weight. He forced himself into action before it could cripple him or wring his mind out into madness.

Past a burning sneaker and a roasting skull with foam boiling out of fractures, Chad hurried through the heap to Pengsy, who had all but dug himself out in tantrums of flying bones and carrion.

"Come on," Chad said to him, his voice choked with vomit that sputtered out.

He grabbed Pengsy's arm to help him up.

Pengsy pulled as if to knock Chad down and flung himself with a cry. He swung his free fist, missed, blundered, tumbled down the heap toward the lake of muck, and stopped short.

A nasally voice rasped from above: "*Baaaaaad puppet.*"

Two gibgoblins dropped.

The first plunged into a giggling swoop onto Pengsy, who wrestled with it in a shrieking frenzy.

The second landed on the heap in front of Chad, where the firelight glowed through its body and scored its alien

skeletal system, the squirming organs and throbbing veins beneath the scaly membranes of its flesh, the writhing changing mass of its intestines that could have been a nest of snakes in its hungry core. It snapped its mouth wide open with strings of goo from its razor teeth, lunged, and Chad swung with a cry of repulsion.

The sledgehammer crashed into its skull, bashed it in with a sickening crunch and fan of wriggling viscera, as if its head had been full of worms.

Its body collapsed and with a fizzing sound dissolved into a foul jelly that slid off the bones, giving off the same dim glow of green that now haloed the hammer head.

Gibgoblins that had entered the pool in the meanwhile, moving to circumnavigate the patches of flame, had stopped. Their expressions had changed. It was hard to tell to *what* with faces like theirs. They seemed wary again, probably after seeing Chad brain their buddy. They seemed confused, too, surely caused in part by Pengsy beating the stuffing out of the other one.

They weren't used to people *fighting back* and this might well have been the first time it happened. They had underestimated Chad and surely had no idea what kind of bomb they were playing with when they messed with Pengsy's mind.

Chad was amazed himself, however far-flung the sentiment inside him, as he made his way down the heap. He had expected, dreaded, that the thing would rip up Pengsy in short order. Wrongly so.

Pengsy looked bloodier now from new wounds, but he was crazier and angrier. In a frenzy of profanity and punches, Pengsy wasn't just getting the better of it. He was *punishing* it. When it tried another slash, Pengsy caught the arm, bit into flesh that Chad wouldn't have wanted to touch much less stick his mouth on, and Pengsy gnawed and thrashed his head

on it like a vicious dog.

That's when Chad knew Pengsy was far gone, possessed of a lunacy it was hard to imagine anyone could recover from.

They could handle the gibgoblins one by one, but it was only a matter of time before the flames died down more and the creatures overran them. Getting himself out of that place alive would be hard enough, maybe impossible, but Chad couldn't leave Pengsy there to die. He wouldn't.

Taking stock of where the gibgoblins were, Chad swept around with his gaze. It stuck on a corner of the heap, which branched out in a peninsula that came a leap short of an outcropping before the mouth of a passage wide enough to drive through. It was on the same side of the cavern as the opening at the ledge overhead. He saw it was free of creatures, any in view anyway, but it was dark too. Black. Even so, he saw no other option.

He looked sharply to Pengsy, who had the gibgoblin down and mewling as he kicked it and screamed profanities.

Over the symphony of giggling, Chad bellowed at the top of his voice: "*PADG-E-E-E-E-T!*"

Pengsy snapped up his head, eyes crazed, face black with muck, blood and drool running from his hanging jaw. He didn't notice the gibgoblin crawling off. Chad didn't think he noticed much of anything else but him now.

And that was good.

Chad gave Pengsy the finger. "C'mon, Padget!"

With a furious wail, Pengsy came after him.

And Chad hustled toward the cave, snatching glances over his shoulder.

Come and get me, buddy. Show me who's boss.

Pengsy scrambled along the edge after him, taking no notice when a dozen gibgoblins rose up the other side of the heap. They advanced, but wouldn't catch up to Pengsy if he

kept moving.

Bones snapping and carcasses spitting fluid under his weight, Chad screamed *Padget!* over and over again as he made his way down the peninsula. The grimy remains of a typewriter caught his eye, the back side of a skull with a pony tail lashed his heart, and Danny Rothman's cell phone, lying open and half buried, kicked up the memory of that phone call from Danny at three in the morning.

(The freezer door must have been open and the signal carried. He didn't bump it. They did, while they were eating him, and the call cut off when the door closed. Those wet sucking sounds were the sounds of them eating Danny. Oh god, that's what they were...)

He felt his stomach hitch again with the want to set off another round of vomiting. Holding it down, he kept moving.

Storming after Chad, hitching on the bones in blunders he recovered swiftly from, Pengsy screamed babble again, words from the dictionary of the insane, and all the while gave voice to hoarse cries between that told of great pain from injury.

Pain was good. It would keep him going.

Chad knew him well. Whenever Pengsy had gone into drunken rages in the past, the only thing that ever stopped him was time, getting his way, unconsciousness, or big men holding him down until his fire burned out.

Pain only riled him up more.

Chad had no pain himself. He was too goddamned scared to have it now, especially when all the gibgoblins sprang from their perches and those already at the bottom level charged across the Grim in a storm of splashes. Some drew so close to the fire that Chad had to wonder if they were scared by it to begin with.

An argument brewed in the back of his mind.

Why now? Why come now when we're running?

(Maybe because you're running. They understand fear

and succumbing and dying. Not fighting.)

Part of his conversation with Donald Prater flashed in his mind and he remembered that Sam Blainey, hero of The Gibgoblins, defeated them all in the Grim.

Yeah, well, I bet he didn't have to fight an entire army of the damn things.

Chad stopped where the bones ended and the filthy pool met them with a thick layer of filth and masses of foul jelly riddled with larvae--white slimy sloshing things that looked like miniature mermen. Newborn gibgoblins was the only thing that came to mind.

The Grim wasn't just their killing place, but nursery.

Their breeding ground, he thought dourly, and chugged sour breaths. And they've been breeding since the fifties. There could be hundreds. Fuck Sam Blainey.

He wrenched his eyes away from the larvae.

Vomit spurted between his teeth and his nose burned with bile that cut off the rest of the smells, almost a merciful thing.

Pengsy was almost upon him, and the nearest demonic platoon was almost upon Pengsy.

Chad backed, ran, leaped, and wanted to scream when his feet plunged into the filth up to the ankles. He scrambled up onto the outcropping before the cave, which could hold any number of terrible surprises.

Theoretical surprises.

There was nothing theoretical about the hordes he saw closing in.

Once he heard Pengsy's feet splashing, Chad barreled into the cave with a tight grip on the sledgehammer. Trusting nothing, he felt only a slice of relief from seeing that the passage was not black, but dim with random pools of light of varying intensity that extended from the sides. He almost

didn't want to know where the light came from, but he had to pass through them, had to press onward.

"Padget! Come on!" Chad still heard him coming, picking up speed, his angry cries fortunately coming from much closer than the choir of giggling and braying.

Moving along, his gaze swept over the walls that were riddled with tunnel holes partitioned off by alcoves. In the alcoves were the sources of light, openings in the walls of all shapes and sizes. What lay beyond them was a blur in passing.

Then he stopped, looking back to check on the state of things, which was *not so good* with Pengsy in a hobbling run now and the unearthly hordes gaining ground behind him again, their short awkward legs carrying them slowly but consistently.

"C'mon, Padget!" Chad baited. *"Padget-Padget-Padget!"*

Pengsy sped up again.

(Good boy.)

Chad turned and his eyes stuck on a small wall opening.

Square with rusty sills on the other side, it looked into the Lemstrom scrap yard--junk-piles and mashed cars illuminated by the night-lamps and battered by hail from a flickering sky. He could only think he was looking through an object in the junkyard, maybe one from Abby's house or even the Hoad house. A window into reality. He reached and his hand struck an invisible barrier that felt like bone.

He shuddered to think how many of these windows there were, and twitched when he heard:

"Ch-a-a-a-d!" Pengsy cried hoarsely.

Chad continued on, darting glances through the openings on one side as he passed them. A view into Henry Boggs's living room where Boggs had left his TV on. Into Tom Beamish's kitchen from a cupboard. Three more the same. Into a bedroom he didn't recognize. A living room. A

backyard. The inside of an oven illuminated by the light coming from the opening across the passage. The Valley Library from a view he recognized as where the painting of the ship on the stormy sea was. Into...

So distracted, he hadn't noticed what crept out from side passages ahead.

Giggling, claws raised to slash, two gibgoblins rushed him. He leaped back with a cry of surprise, swung the hammer, missed, and hit as he hefted it back the other way.

One blundered to the floor, merely knocked down.

The other leaped, crashed into him with jolts of pain from its claws, and drove him hard against the wall. His screaming grin of horror reflected on the big black eyes of the creature, he gripped the sticky flesh of its neck, squeezed, pushed as hard as he could to get it off, all the while biting back the pain of the claws in him. It was no use. The gibgoblin thrust its head forward, plunged its teeth into his shoulder, and gnawed crazily for what was only moments but felt like eternities.

Chad felt his blood flowing as warmly down his chest as his piss down his legs, smelled the rancid stink of the creature as if it bathed in sulfur and curdled milk.

Another blast of pain came from its claws when Pengsy ripped the gibgoblin off him. *"Mine!"* He flung it against the opposing wall as if it weighed nothing and hit it while it was down, one vicious kick after another. *"Chad's mine! Mine! Fuckin' m-i-i-i-ne!"*

The other gibgoblin giggled nearby, its teeth chattering, and Chad knocked those teeth down its rotten throat with the sledgehammer. It hit the floor, sputtering out its daggers, and Chad busted its spine with another furious fall of the hammer.

It dissolved, leaving bones and a brighter green glow on the head of the hammer.

Chad whirled, grabbed Pengsy by the arm, tugged hard

enough to knock him off-balance and stumbling past him, and the sledgehammer crashed mightily on the other gibgoblin.

Again and again. It died too.

The horde that rushed after them from the main cavern--a flood of claws and giggling carnivorous mouths with dagger teeth that Chad *did not* want to *feel* again--were thirty feet away, a carnival of painful death closing in.

In the back of his mind danced a strange thought that the gibgoblins really didn't want to catch up, only make it seem as if that was their intention, but it was a wishful and irrational thought at best.

In those moments, Chad had forgotten Pengsy was even there, *Pengsy who?*, until he turned and bumped into him.

Pengsy stood still, body trembling, eyes wide and fixed on a sizable opening that looked into the messy bedroom of his apartment.

The mirror, Chad thought. *The mirror he took from Abby's. I should have thought of that.*

"Pengsy?" He was almost afraid to speak to him, knowing there wasn't time for a scuffle with the horde coming. "We gotta go."

Pengsy looked at him, blinking, incoherent. "Eric."

Oh goddamnit.

Chad grabbed his arm, pulled, and when Pengsy resisted, he told him: "We were bad boys, Pengsy, and now we're in Hell!" Chad pointed over his shoulder. "Get your shit together so we can get out before the devil catches us!"

When Pengsy turned and saw *the death horde*, he started screaming not in rage but in terror.

"We're on the same page now." Chad tugged him. *"Come o-o-o-n!"*

Pengsy all but ran him over.

Chad kept up easily though, as Pengsy was hurt and much more aware of the pain now. *"Left! Anywhere to the*

left! We've gotta--" He grabbed him when he motioned right.
"*Your other fuggin left!*"

Pengsy stumbled, collapsed to the floor with a scream that turned to vomiting. Useless.

"Damn you!" Chad hunkered, lifted him, rammed his shoulder into his gut while Pengsy puked on his aching back, and he hoisted Pengsy over a shoulder.

Doubts came immediately that he would be able to run while carrying him.

The doubts disappeared in a flash flood of adrenaline when the gibgoblins stormed into the passage.

He ran like hell.

Hustling, screaming, racing through passage intersections and making snap decisions based on his gut and his sense of direction, passing windows into the world and the dim light cast from them, Chad ran with utter certainty that he and Pengsy were dead already and all this effort was a formality, but he had to try.

In dread of dead-ends, of the gibgoblins cutting him off from side passages or those pursuing him catching up, in dread that he would not be able to effectively swing the hammer if he needed to, Chad fled through a maze.

Pengsy screamed between heaves, vomited down Chad's back and in his wake, until he fell silent and his weight bore down harder. *Unconscious?* Chad hoped.

As he ran and ran, sounds wafted out of tunnel openings--voices of men and women, children, rasping lighters, engines, old radio programs, Buffalo Bob and the cheers of the peanut gallery on TV, a storm of loud typewriter clacks, noises of all variety--and they built up until they were deafening, a hurricane of noise and voices now indistinguishable.

Chad couldn't shake the strange feeling that he wasn't just running for his life in some otherworldly place, but *inside*

Ed Hoad, through the corridors deep down inside him where all his filth and vices and demons precipitated, the sewers of a man's tortured soul which demons had taken for their own, excavated, took up residence in, set up shop to conduct the business of nature, the way things are: boys will be boys, people will be people, gibgoblins will be gibgoblins, and gibgoblins will eat people and make more gibgoblins to eat *more people* until Chad Hyman--that fine man who took the And out of Handyman--uses his sledgehammer to bust the cycle by murdering a fifty year-old General Electric freezer.

Truth stranger than fiction?

The demonic tittering was well in his wake, but he did not slow down until he ran up a slope to a fork in the passage. One led in the direction he was almost sure he needed to go, and might just lead to the ledge over the cavern. Judgment call. His internal compass was frazzled now. One way or the other.

He chose, prayed, and slowed down at the next curve where his gaze riveted to a small rectangular opening. Its dim view, as if through a mirror or a picture over the foot of a bed, looked over a child in a dress, bound there with rope. However jarring and disturbing this sight of some place in the world outside the grim, the real world, Chad kept moving.

Until a new sight made him halt at once.

A new kind of terror ran through him in a freezing, sobering wash straight into his heart, which nearly stopped.

He saw a world window the size of a door, or the beginning of one as the view was faint, not clear so as to trick the eyes into thinking one could step through it like the others he had seen, but a view seen through heavily smoked glass.

The view was unmistakable.

He had seen it many times before.

He saw the plastic shelves of stuffed animals, bins of plastic toys, and the closed louvered door to Buck's closet. The

slivers of light between the louvers flashed with lightning.

"No," he said in an out-of-breath voice.

Shuddering, he approached it and scolded himself for this. He remembered something Prater said about the gibgoblins and objects. Associations. They had found a line on that closet through him, through his association with it and Buck's monsters, maybe even his fear after they threatened to...

"Now... you've... done it," he growled.

He knew this was where the barrier between the world and the Grim was thin. Thin enough to see through. But only to see through, maybe wreak some havoc on somebody's mind, but not physically enter. They were windows into the world that the Grim was anchored to through one physical connection, a one way door in the form of that freezer.

And that rusty old bitch was scheduled for demolition.

Moving with purpose, quickening, Chad followed his gut and navigated the passages. He passed an opening, stopped, backed, saw it was the ledge he needed.

He moved carefully with Pengsy over a shoulder and did *not* look over the edge, down onto the heap. Doing his best to ignore the cacophony of the gibgoblin chatter and cackling, he took it step by step and tried not to puke again as he coughed from the smoke. It gathered in the rocky dome of the cavern faster than it could vent through the fissures and had begun to roll down the rugged walls.

His eyes burned as thick patches of the smoke wafted by. A shape moved in the corner of his vision, causing a twitch and a loss of balance. He felt himself pitching and righted himself out, heart beating ferociously in his chest.

Twenty or so feet along the wall, no longer on the ledge, was the gibgoblin with the three beard-like protrusions from its chin. A leader gibgoblin or at the very least a different one from the others, it grinned from a new perch. It did not give

voice to idiot cannibal giggles as the others. It did not sneer as before. It only grinned.

Chad didn't like that grin, even if it wasn't really a grin at all. The creatures so foreign, their giggles or grins might have meant something completely different.

Yet he couldn't shake off the feeling it wasn't just a grin, but a *knowing* grin.

A malicious grin.

What does he know that I don't? he thought.

(Have I forgotten something? Did I miss something?)

Warily, he looked into the opening that led a step up into the freezer. The weedy ground was vertical to the right like a wall, trees rose out of it crossing from right to left, and hail dropped from left to right.

With one last uneasy glance at the gibgoblin king, Chad pitched the sledgehammer outside.

Keeping a grip on Pengsy's arm, Chad set him down and struggled past him. Another round of powerful flashes stabbed his eyes and seared through him, causing him to spasm. He felt Pengsy's wrist slipping. Pengsy might have stayed put the way Chad had left him scrunched in the opening over the ledge, but he could have pitched over and fallen back onto the heap too.

Chad kept his hold on Pengsy.

The redirected gravity took hold of him, pushed to one side with a flip-flop of his stomach.

His shoulder slammed against the crusty mouth of the freezer. He felt a fresh batch of vomit rising, but did not wait it out. The infernal giggling came from close now.

Too close.

Chad heard *them* on the ledge while he scrambled out, planted a boot on the soggy ground, gnarred as he pulled Pengsy out...

T W E N T Y - O N E

DEMON NIGHT

1

The wind had built up to a dull roar around the house at 32 Saybrook before the rain came. It bucketed at shifting angles, saturated the ground, fountained off the clogged gutters of the house, all while the storm thrashed the night with god-splitting thunderclaps and hurled bolt after bolt of lightning from its rage of clouds.

They bombarded the forest where weak trees fell in the wind with crackling, rending booms. One bolt struck a dying tree behind the house in a starburst of burning splinters. The top half pitched in the wind, ripping with a final splintering crunch, and crashed to the ground. Branches slammed against the corner of the house, busted off gutters and shattered a window in Kirsten Dudley's bedroom.

The power blacked out then, after many brown-outs, and to Joe Rendell's surprise came back up. Leaves whirled past the picture window, small branches tumbled past, and a loose wire flailed in the wind.

If it was the phone wire, it didn't matter.

Joe had tried for fifteen minutes to get the phone working, pressing the power button on the cordless phone idiotically, hearing only sizzles of static after each lightning flash and a scratchy hiss on the line like a needle on a record too ancient and dusty to play.

Blasted storm...

The radar screens shown on every major TV channel

looked ominous, the storm a fire-engine red amoeba that had lost speed but no power as it blanketed Sutton Valley.

A weatherman stopped mid-sentence, raising a hand to his ear and cocking to the side, listening, as if to a whispering voice. *"We have a Barksdale resident on the line via cell phone and we're getting a bulletin now by the--"*

Thunder crashed.

The lights pulsed and cable died.

A static blizzard brayed.

Joe hit mute on the remote, blinked. His mind backed up and stuck on *cell phone*.

He thought of William's that was still there, couldn't believe he hadn't sooner, and sought it.

Arguing and moving through the house with it, he found a signal, which proved not so reliable. It cut off during three attempts to call Castillo, twice while it was ringing, but kept at it as he returned to the bathroom.

By then, the rain had turned to hail that pelted the roof and windows like stones.

They drummed the bathroom window as he looked out. He expected the jeep would be gone. Now that the storm had gotten violent, he couldn't imagine Chad Hyman would still be out in it. That anyone would.

On that note, the thought of William and Kirsten crashed on his heart.

He made out nothing through the ice splats on the glass. He hadn't wanted to crank the window open again and let the rain through the screen, but saw he would have to.

When he did, the air blew cold against his face and hail bounced off the screen like ping-pong balls.

Alarmed, he saw the jeep just as it had been before.

Except something moved in its headlights now.

His disbelief only grew as he watched what next happened in that clearing. He watched every beat while

talking with Castillo on a bad connection.

Sometimes it cut off; other times his voice did.

Pale, Joe watched the behavior of clouds that glided much too low, the bizarre scene that played out in the clearing, and watched each flicker of lightning flash the ghost of the Hoad house before his eyes.

It added to the charge inside him where the past had been awakened. The *knowing* strengthened within him. The waiting was almost over.

2

The whipping wind felt arctic, his eyes like frozen stones in a red hot skull. Squinting, grimacing while the racketing hail stung his face, Chad howled from the exertion and pain as he dragged Pengsy's dead weight out of the freezer and along the muddy ground.

Far enough. He stopped.

His gaze swept over the jeep--still shining its headlights but quiet. At some point, the engine had quit.

Gritting his teeth, he went for the hammer.

The trees rocked, lightning hurled down all around as if from the wrath of angry gods, the storm filled the world with noise and light, and he was barely aware of any of it.

His attention focused on the task at hand.

He lumbered forward.

A giggling wafted out of the freezer.

As he thought it might.

A gibgoblin emerged from the mouth of the freezer. It did not get far before it bumped into the hammer, which rapped its skull hard enough to stun it before sweeping back and around.

Ready for action.

"You weren't invited," Chad said.

As he stood over it, lightning flashed him on lenses of the gibgoblin's upturned eyes, an almost majestic icon of a brawny man with a giant hammer--a tool of hard work, a weapon of simple brutal might.

It bashed the creature's head into the ground in a burst of bone shards and wriggling gunk.

Chad spat on the body as it lost substance.

The tittering sounds from the freezer turned bitter and the other creatures drew back into the Grim.

Chad would assume nothing.

Hail glancing off him, he stomped around the freezer.

He hunkered down on a knee, gripped its crusty rot, and gave voice to a raucous scream of effort as he muscled it over, face-down on the remains of the door.

It stirred with the inhuman cackles and gabble of the gibgoblins who stopped rocking it once it began to deteriorate more from the added stress.

Old, rotten, now battered, it couldn't take much more.

Chad crossed through his headlight beams, set the hammer down on its head with the shadow of the handle extending over the rot-box, and he went to Pengsy.

Choking, Pengsy spurted vomit from his works when Chad kicked him over. Drifting in and out of consciousness, he only groaned when Chad hoisted him up once again and carried him to the jeep.

"You stay here." Chad opened the passenger door and put Pengsy in the seat. "Stay here. Don't move."

"Don't move," Pengsy repeated in a lethargic murmur.

His head lolled as Chad raised Pengsy's limp arm and dropped it in his lap.

"I mean it."

"Ehhhm fine..."

"You're a drunken wreck." Chad closed the door and craned his head slowly.

"Now *you*."

Glaring from the tops of his eyes, Chad impended on the freezer. His hand gripped the hammer in passing, feet stopped, and brows lowered.

The hammer wound back, crashed down, up and down as steady as a machine with bursts of shooting debris and rasping booms that echoed down the hill to join the thunder that rolled back and forth across the valley.

His shadow thrown by the headlights one of a rabid madman laying a victim low, Chad swung and swung, smashing the freezer, a skeleton of what it once was.

A wedge of the broken door flapped on its shrieking hinge, the desperate motions of a limb of something alive but dying.

Rotted fragments flew.

Everything but the sledgehammer and the freezer went forgotten. He was no longer Chad Hyman. Not even Chad.

He was Rage. Frenzy. Demolition.

He was The Destroyer.

And destroy he *did*.

Weeping, swinging, screaming, smashing, laughing, he smashed the mangled remains until a dull crackling noise grew, jet black smoke streamed up out of it as if the darkness inside had become gaseous, and green flames licked out of its carcass, sprouting out all over, multiplying in a rash of eerie light that would consume most of it in ten minutes and wink out five or so after, leaving only a scattering of ash, strange spatter, and bone fragments which were not all human.

Chad staggered back, dropped the sledgehammer, crumpled into a heap, draggled out shuddering moans, and gazed with haunted eyes in the wavering green glow.

He stayed that way for an unknown time.

Before his eyes moved to the side.

They lit up with a knowing and gazed down the cul-de-

sac.

3

Earlier that night, the blare of the jeep's engine as it had taken its first charge had only registered in Betty's mind as one of those random lead-foots of the night that flew down Saybrook Road now and then. The ruckus that followed, the first wave and then the second while Chad The Destroyer conducted his terrible business, had gone unheard to her tortured ears.

Whatever hell was breaking loose at The Sunshine Bar and Grille had sent Roy and the boys into an uproar. As Roy might have put it, they had *gone turkeyshit*.

From nowhere and everywhere their voices boomed, shouted over one another, called her name, called her *other* names that weren't so nice, screamed lunatic babble that included words she knew like PORT and NEGATE, and words that were not words at all, utterances of alien tongues.

Curled under comforters with pillows over her head, she tried in vain not to hear any of it.

"All of you stop it!"

She kept her eyes closed tight.

"Just stop it! For goodness sake!"

"Negate! Negate! Negate!"

A regiment of other noises erupted in the background, shrieks that made her think of sick roosters, squeals of pigs, giggles of possessed dolls, and pounding.

They were all pounding, the sound damp at first like chains of fireworks heard from miles away, then growing, rising to a thunder roll that competed with the storm.

The house trembled, walls thrummed.

The pillows stifled Betty's long frustrated scream.

"Negate, negate, negate..."

(No gate, no gate, no gate!)

"No Annie under floor, no Annie under floor!"

She opened her eyes under her pillow.

They grew.

"Help us, you bitch!" Roy screamed. "Help us now!"

"Dying port, dying port!"

"Get the gun, get the gun..."

"Do it, you can do it, you can..."

"The man! Must stop the man!"

"Gonna get Annie, get Annie..."

Her eyes widened more.

"No gate, no gate!"

"Where's the door, no door!"

(tommyknockers, tommyknockers)

"Annie." Betty surged off the bed in a flurry of blankets, and hurried down the hall.

Mounted picture frames rocked and jostled, the glass cracking, people in photographs animate and screaming and pounding, like victims of a magic spell trying to bust through the barriers that kept them imprisoned.

Giving them no heed, she went through the dining room with a passing glare at the painting.

Sprawled on the floor of the picture, a bludgeoned apostle lay at the mercy of a shadow attacker who swung and smashed with a hammer, busted brittle bones and sent black blood and rust and gunk flying. Other debris rained from above, the scenery crumbling the way old rusty things do, falling into pieces that sucked into a background mist.

The other apostles ran around in the darkening fog, giggling and baying, none seated at the table where a bloody Ed Hoad sat. Hunched over a broken bottle and smashed typewriter with green flames fluttering up around the keys, he snatched up typewritten pages from a stack one by one, stuffed

them in his mouth, and chewed them as grudgingly as the apostles had chewed Mister Ben's stuffing.

She heard Roy screaming for her, his voice damp and echoing as if from some great distance, as she hurried through the kitchen.

The basement door smiled.

And so did *she* as she pulled it open.

Down the stairs, past the old monster of a furnace, past Roy's workbench as he had left it so many years ago before he suffered William Dudley's fate, past the gardening tools and sets of rubber gloves with grips, the same kind of gloves she wore the afternoon she clapped a hand over the mouth of a screaming little girl and pulled her from the hungry grasp of
(the boys?)

(buccas?)

(*tommyknockers, tommyknockers?*)

bad things, Betty entered the furnished end of the basement in fear that she would find Annie gone.

But she wasn't.

Annie lay on a bed festooned with frilly pillows and cartoon princesses on the blankets and sheets. Her blonde hair curled up like Shirley Temple's, her yellow dress sizes too small for her body that had grown so much since years ago when she had died of polio at the age of four, she looked scared and Betty didn't blame her.

"Don't you let those boys get to you." Betty smiled at the way Annie squirmed in the ropes that bound her ankles and wrists to keep her from being naughty again and trying to run off like silly kids are known to do. "Sometimes they just don't know when to quit. Don't worry. I think they'll be finished soon."

As if the boys had heard her, they settled down.

The wall tremors stopped, the pounding and voices and other bad sounds fading to silence.

Betty stood there for some unknown time, her head raised.

Two more raps.

Knock, knock.

(Who's there?)

Her mind that had been turning over this new development churned out an exciting possibility, and no matter what their differences had been and what she had told him at The Sunshine Bar and Grille--which had since closed forever--it *was* exciting.

"Roy," she said breathlessly.

She hurried upstairs, through the kitchen, through the dining room where the painting hung. Showing a table that was clear and empty, the painting was empty.

The apostles: no more

Her mysterious visitor kept knocking on the door.

(Late last night and the night before...)

"One minute, my darling." She undid the locks, turned the knob, pulled, and smiled. "Oh Roy, I know I said you could never come back. But you can. You... can."

Her voice withered in her throat.

She stepped back.

And back.

Aghast.

With trembling hands.

At her door

stood The Tommyknocker Man.

4

Hair disheveled and dotted with debris, face dark with the same rotten muck and blood that was splattered on his clothes, one eye twitching, both dire and verging on deranged, a huge hammer dangling at his side, *The Man* that towered on the welcome mat looked like a psycho lumberjack fresh out of captivity from a filthy mine. He was a vision of death and

wouldn't have cared had he known.

"You've been feeding it."

When he raised a handful of chicken bones and let them drop, the old lady in the pink robe watched in dumb awe as if he just showed her a magic trick.

"It was rabid-evil and I put it down," he said, no more aware of his choice of words than his tone which was bone-cold. "I put it down for good... and I *saw* things."

Whether the look of confusion was genuine, he didn't know or care, but he didn't doubt the fear he saw in her eyes. The monsters were afraid of him, and he had learned that monsters didn't just lurk in closets and under beds or even in hidden worlds behind old upright freezers. Sometimes, they lived next door and wore paisley dresses.

"The little girl wasn't in there." Chad shook his head slowly, the white of his eyes standing out in contrast to his grimy face. "I know *what you did*, Betty."

Trembling, she gripped the door and her voice was thin when she said, "Leave us alone."

"I know... what you did."

She slammed the door in his face and locked it too, but he didn't require a key to proceed.

Chad lifted the sledgehammer.

Splinters flew as the door smashed open.

Betty screamed, her hands thrashing, feet drawing her back toward the wall where there hung The Lord's Commandments, a crucifix that was askew, and a wide painting of a long table cluttered with rubble, a painting Chad swore he caught a flash of movement in as he advanced.

It must have been a Grim window.

His dirty work-boot landed inside the doorway, and the blackened head of the hammer glided in over it as the next boot entered uninvited.

"I hope for both our sakes she's alive and well." Chad studied the movements of her eyes and face, closed the distance. "Where is she?"

Betty twitched her head every which way, eyes blinking rapidly. *"She better be good, be as good as she..."*, she said in a teary voice. *"Sh-She c-c-cuh..."*

Chad had long suspected the woman wasn't all there, now he knew. "Where is Kirsten Dudley!"

"Missing, missing. She's missing."

"Where's the girl you took?" Chad knew the layout of that house, considered how small it was with only one bedroom, and then remembered seeing a light on in the basement. "Never mind. I know."

"I'll call the police!" She jerked back when he raised the hammer.

He leaned it on a shoulder. "That's a mighty fine idea." *It's also the sanest thing that's left your mouth so far.* "Go ahead and do that."

Chad hadn't had the sense of mind when he left the house to grab his cell phone, which was just as well. After dealing with the gibgoblins, he probably wouldn't have thought to use it, much less remembered that he owned one. Once the epiphany brought on by that sight of a child through a grim window came to him, it had sent him into action.

Call the police, yes she should.

But she showed no sign she was going to.

He saw the dangerous flicker in her eyes again and kept it in mind as he turned and crossed the kitchen.

(Betty Morgan took an ax...)

(Gave Chad Hyman forty whacks...)

He would hear her coming if she made a move. With his senses so keyed up, he reckoned he could hear an ant sneeze in Hell or fart in Heaven.

The basement door smiled, and he did not.

Down the stairs, over scattered dusty knick-knacks and through the cellar gloom--

(over the river and through the woods)

Chad found a girl bound to a bed in a creepy suite that Betty must have prepared weeks before, part prison for this child not hers and part shrine to a child that had been. He had only seen Kirsten once or twice, but recognized her, despite the ill-fitting moldy dress and popcorn curls.

He did not stop to take stock of just how warped this all was, or how very sad.

With a wary glance at the old photograph on the wall at the foot of bed, a picture of a young Betty and Roy Morgan with an open-mouthed toddler, he started undoing the ropes.

Kirsten cried through the smiling duct-tape and looked up at him warily until he said:

"I'm here to take you home." He knew there was no home to go to with her daddy gone, but it was the quickest way he could think of to communicate that he was one of the good guys.

Footfalls trailed overhead.

Wood banged and silverware clattered.

What are you up to, Betty?

Once he freed Kirsten of the ropes and the tape, Chad hoisted her up on one arm and gripped the hammer with the other. It made him feel better. Betty might have been a frail old lady, but she was also as crazy as hell.

Kirsten clung tightly, sniveling.

"Shshsh. I want you to be as quiet as you can as we walk out. Okay, honey? Quiet as a church mouse." He groaned in pain and brought a hand to his side where a gibgoblin had dug its claws in.

Only now, while his attention was on it, did he feel the blood running down his skin. His body ached all over, but that

concerned him the most.

"Quiet as a church mouse," he repeated. "Can you do that?"

She nodded and sniffled.

"Let's not get spooky Betty any more excited than she is."

He carried Kirsten to the foot of the stairs, stared up with a grimace of distrust, which had to do with more than Betty Morgan and what she might be capable of.

Something felt wrong. He had destroyed the freezer, had Kirsten alive in his arms, and yet did not feel the sense of accomplishment and security he should have.

He remembered the carnivorous grin of the gibgoblin that looked different, the gibgoblin he now mentally referenced as *the gibgoblin king*.

That knowing mocking grin it wore as he left the Grim--
It's not over, his gut told him, and he pushed the feeling away, wanting nothing to do with it.

Finally, he said to Kirsten: "Let's do this."

One stealthy step at a time, Chad climbed up and made it through the kitchen without incident.

When he cleared the doorway into the dining room, Betty stepped in his path with a hand behind her back.

"*You're not taking her!*" Betty said.

Kirsten shrieked into the side of his neck.

Chad stepped back, giving himself distance and reaction time if Betty charged with a knife he suspected she may have plucked from the silverware drawer.

"Step aside," he said. "I don't wanna hurt a lady."

His attention had been fixed on the whole of her, waiting for a sudden move, but she didn't need to take a step for her next play.

He didn't see the revolver until the huge barrel stared him in the face.

"Put her down." Betty's eyes were disturbingly wide.

A breath snagged in his chest.

His gaze stayed on the gun as he let the sledgehammer drop to the side.

"My baby." The revolver trembled. "Put down my baby. You're not taking Annie again."

"This is Kirsten Dudley from next door."

"The boy said she was Annie!" Betty tightened her finger against the trigger. "He said it was!"

"She isn't, no matter what this boy said."

"His name is General," Kirsten whispered shakily in Chad's ear, but the words meant nothing to him.

"It's time for us to--"

"No." Tears streaked Betty's face. "I'm a good mother!"

"She's not yours," Chad said.

"Shut up!"

"If you shoot me, you might hit her and you wouldn't want that would you?" His own calmness surprised him, but after what he had seen that night, a gun seemed like a slight thing. "It's unladylike and unbecoming besides."

Betty narrowed her eyes, tightened her face, clenched her dentures, and Chad knew then that *it* was coming. He felt only a sliver of fear in his frame of mind. A large part of him had defaulted to denial that this night was happening, and wanted to believe he was having one helluva horrible dream that he would soon wake from.

"Not... *again*," she growled.

And she pulled the trigger.

The click was loud, a *real* sound as frightening as it was relieving, because a very real bullet could have just tagged Chad's chest and he knew it now.

Chad saw no safety on the thing. Either there were no bullets in the gun or just none in *that* chamber.

Betty raised the gun at a slant, blinking crazily at it,

furrowing her brows. "Oh dear." She looked at Chad. "That wasn't supposed to happen, was it?"

Thank god for small favors and lost marbles.

Chad ripped the gun out of her hand, flung it out a window with a pop of glass, and turned for the door. "You are one crazy witch."

Shrieking, Betty snapped up a knife and rushed him.

Chad had glimpsed the sudden motion in the corner of his eye. He caught her arm at the wrist with his free hand, the tip of the knife poking into his arm, and he whirled her around.

The knife sailed from her grasp.

She stumbled in a crazed twirling dance across the room, bumped into the wall, and when she motioned to come back at him, her feet came forward and head jerked back.

A clawed hand had a grip on her silver hair.

It came from the bottom of the painting, out of it, and a face rushed up in front of the long table.

Chad only caught a flash of that face--a glimpse so brief that he hadn't seen the fully black eyes, demon teeth, and pointed ears--before Betty blocked his view of it. His muscles locked, body quivering in the doorway, arms holding Kirsten who had gone into a stunned silence, he told himself that face hadn't been *Jesus*.

Betty screamed, flailed one arm, groped around the wooden frame of the painting while the thing inside it pulled her head back into it.

The painting came off the wall and went with Betty as she stumbled forward, her legs scrambling around and bumping into things blindly. The painting frame was on her shoulders, like someone had ringed her head with it.

Only Chad didn't see her head. To his eyes, her body stopped at the shoulders, stopped where it poked into the Grim that painting was a window into, like someone half in one of those portable holes in cartoons.

Her shoulders pulled through the frame, body hit the floor, feet kicked, as gray arms gripped fistfuls of pink robe and pulled and pulled, making that awful sound which could have been mistook for a human giggle but Chad now knew wasn't a giggle any more than it was human.

The painting went flat on the floor, a rectangular window in reality which her body pulled through all at once, leaving behind one slipper that caught on the frame.

The hand rushed up and snatched that down too, before the black solidified like marble.

It exploded up into black shards that hit the ceiling and burst into dust on impact.

The cloud of it drifted down and along the floor like a dirty ground-hugging fog.

He almost screamed at Kirsten's tiny voice.

"Where did she go?"

Chad caught his breath.

"I do not know," he lied wanly.

"She won't come back will she?"

Chad stepped forward, grabbed his hammer, and carried Kirsten through the door. "Only in therapy."

A giggling trailed behind him that froze him in his tracks. The sound was joined by another, and another, followed by the metallic creak of what could have been the oven. Then came the damp clatter and ping of containers, bottles, or jars bumping in the refrigerator.

It's not possible. I destroyed the freezer. They can't leave the Grim. It's not possible.

Thinking of the gibgoblin that had crawled fully out of the freezer, the one that pulled Betty through the painting, and that damnable grin of jagged teeth in the maw of the gibgoblin king, he turned very slowly in the doorway on the edge of the rain.

Another innocent question asked from a child to a man who felt anything but innocent right now: "What's that?"

Chad set his eyes on the gibgoblin king rising, its three growths wriggling from its chin. It rose out of the painting which the black jags had exploded out of.

It was the barrier, he thought, which might not have been exactly right but was close enough. *The barrier between... oh god, what have I done...*

His mind flipped back again to his talk with Donald Prater, when Prater talked about Sam Blainey defeating the gibgoblins in the Grim and things that might have happened in the story but hadn't. Prater had gone off on too many frustrating tangents when all Chad had been interested in was a digest version, the highlights, a quick how-to, a crash course in Vanquishing Gibgoblins.

Chad did not remember Prater's words verbatim, but he remembered the cursed gist of it now, here in the world where he felt more secure and his mind was not choked in the noose of terror the Grim had tightened around it.

When I went into the Grim, it became a part of me. They became my demons too and I didn't take care of them, didn't get the job done, and I took them with me back into the world. God forgive me, I brought it into the world, I made it part of the world, and now they're coming through the windows.

Kirsten started screaming, a shrill sound piercing Chad's head which he shook from side to side as if in violent refusal.

But I couldn't have killed them all. There were too many. It was impossible. I would have died in there. Maybe that's what was supposed to happen. Maybe I wasn't the one. Maybe I never was. God, maybe this is what they had in mind all along and maneuvered me just like the others. The Movers moved Chad Hyman, Film at Eleven.

Backing slowly into the rain, Chad wished he had listened harder to Prater, took notes, or better yet...

"I should..." His eyes swung their gaze to the gibgoblin grinning from around the corner of the kitchen doorway.

"Have read..." The gibgoblin king in the painting propped its clawed hands on the floor, boosted itself out, and planted a taloned foot on Betty's dining room rug.

"That book..."

T W E N T Y - T W O

OUT OF THE GRIM

1

Pain boiled through him as he pushed against the cool wind that drove the rain against him. Chad moved as fast as his wounded body could take him, yet it seemed maddeningly slow as if in a nightmare or trudging through tar. One arm pumped with the hammer. The other held Kirsten who clung in a terrified vice-grip and gave voice to shrieks that were as high and ear-ripping as an industrial whistle.

He barreled up the cul-de-sac toward the clearing where he had left his jeep and Pengsy--drunk, unhinged, passed out on the passenger side when Chad last checked.

Chad slowed to a shocked halt.

Lightning strobed the jeep and the pale shapes of the gibgoblins ambling out around it. He saw three, another two, another, and didn't care where they had climbed out of the Grim. All that mattered was *they were there* and posed a hazard that he couldn't take care of while holding Kirsten.

He too easily imagined a gibgoblin ripping her from his arms in the heat of a battle that would be tricky enough if he had only himself to worry about.

"Pengsy!" Chad screamed, wondering why he didn't see him, hoping he wandered off and kept on going, fearing instead the gibgoblins already found him there vulnerable as Chad had left him and unzipped his guts. *"Peng-seeee!"*

Chad heard the rising chatter of the gibgoblins in his wake as they left the Morgan house.

Where more would follow.

Legions would follow.

For a moment of frightful indecision, he couldn't move. His legs were as ungainly and wobbly as wooden stilts on the pavement, his dread a black cyclone that spun from the crazed beat of his heart, mind taxed and torn in a hundred directions.

He knew he had to find out what happened to Pengsy, he had to get to Buck, get him and Trish both out of the house in case the connection to Buck's closet was strong enough for them to bust through, but first and foremost, he had to get Kirsten Dudley to safety without using the jeep, as the path to it was cut off with trouble.

He knew these things were the most pressing, immediate, but the big picture had crashed into him, overwhelmed him. He thought of all the objects to which the gibgoblins had made windows and that were now doors. All the places around town they might be appearing and attacking innocent people. How he had to find a way to undo what was done and stop this terrible thing he caused before it became a plague to the world. How there might *not* be a way at all.

(--done, what have I done, what have I--)

You're not gonna figure it all out standing there! an inner voice screamed. *You're just gonna get killed! One step at a time! Concentrate on what you can do something about like getting your ass moving RIGHT NOW.*

He snapped a look back at the horde flooding out of the house, the gibgoblin king leading the charge and trampling the food strewn alongside the driveway.

Already in motion, Chad focused on the house at 32, to which the gibgoblins might not have had the time to complete any strong connections to after it was cleared of Abby Arnell's belongings. Chad had seen no windows to it while in the Grim, but that didn't mean there weren't any.

The house might have been a deathtrap waiting to

happen, but *inside* would be safer in the short-term than out in the open, *inside* where he could call home and tell Trish to get her and Buck the hell out of the house, *inside* where lights were inexplicably on and the sudden appearance of a man in the picture window made his heart jump but did not slow his momentum.

Why someone would be there, who the man was, or whether it was a man at all or some gibgoblin trick, Chad would deal with it inside, had no time for anything else.

He was already at the door, which flung in as Chad reached.

"Oh my god!" the man cried. "Kir--"

Chad knocked him back, down, out of the way, and slammed the door, which he locked. *"Who are you?"* In the second it took to ask, Chad already had an approximation as Kirsten had gone into a chanting cry.

"Grandpa! Grandpa!"

"Kirsten!" the man in the robe and pajamas blubbered as he struggled upright. As touching as Chad might have found this reunion, he knew there was a demon horde coming that the man surely hadn't glimpsed. *"Oh my sweet--"*

Chad grabbed his face, while the hammer boomed against the floor at their feet, and he leaned.

"Grandpa! That's my grandpa! Don't hurt Grandpa!"

The sixty-something bald man with gray hair was trembling and wide-eyed. "You took her," he said to Chad in a whimpering voice. "Why did you take my--"

"Quiet!" Chad barked.

"Don't hurt Grandpa Joe! Don't hurt Grandpa Joe!"

"What are you going to do?" Grandpa Joe looked both disturbed and puzzled, as Chad stared hard in his eyes and moved his face from side to side. "What are you doing?"

"Making sure you're Grandpa Joe," Chad said quickly. "The lady next door had her, now it's your turn." He put her

into Joe's eager arms. "Do you have a heart condition?"

"What? No. Why?"

"You will soon."

"There's monsters outside, Grandpa!" Kirsten cried in a mixture of terror and awe. "There's monsters!"

"Some crazy scary shit is gonna happen." Chad hefted up the hammer. "Whatever you see, keep your head. Got it?"

"Yes. What's--"

"Keep your head. Any windows open?"

"Windows. No, I closed--" Joe flinched with Kirsten in his arms as the front door trembled with a riot of knocking and giggling. "Who's that?"

"It ain't Domino's Pizza. Don't open it!" Chad dashed through the living room, kicked things out of his way, headed for the back door. "Stay away from windows! Pictures! Mirrors! Anything with an image! Containers!" He locked and bolted the back door. "Cupboards! The fridge! Anything with a door. There's lots of ways they might get in, lots of--"

Chad feared they already had when Kirsten and Joe screamed, drawing him back into the living room.

The demons outside mobbed the picture window like ghastly gibbering children, climbing over top of one another, chattering jagged teeth, pressing their faces against the glass, scraping it with their claws, leaving slimy smudges from their flesh and smears of drool. So tightly thronged, they all almost looked to be one: a pale writhing mass of black eyes, teeth, and claws.

Joe drew back, his arms around Kirsten protectively.

"What are those th-things?"

Chad took in the living room with sweeps of his gaze, looking for anything the creatures might have connected to and could *fit* through. He spotted a cordless phone on the couch, thought of Trish and Buck, and snatched up the phone,

his hand dialing while he said: "Grandpa Joe, meet the gibgoblins."

Joe looked at him sharply with an expression that told of recognition, before it turned to fright with a jerk of his gaze over Chad's shoulder.

Chad whirled, saw a photo of the Dudleys on the wall-- William, his late wife, and baby Kirsten--*blackening* from the outside to the center where claw-tips protruded. He approached. An arm lunged out at him, the force knocked the picture off the wall, and both tumbled onto the couch and floor. It looked like a severed arm that was somehow still alive and mounted on a picture frame, but Chad knew the arm was still attached to a gibgoblin in the Grim.

"That's why you stay away from pictures!" He kicked it into a corner, brought the phone to his ear, heard nothing.

"A tree fell and broke a window in Kirsten's room," Joe said palely, which Chad heard, noted, didn't respond to as he was busy trying to call home. "I didn't have time to..."

"Come on, come on." Chad turned off the phone, turned it on, hit redial, did it again, frantic. "Why won't this thing..." he started and Joe cut him off with news he didn't want.

"The lines are dead."

And my little boy might be too, he thought in horror, a horror he tried to wrestle down with the argument that the view into Buck's closet from the Grim was hazy, faint. If they were truly places where the barrier between worlds had been made *thin*, that place might not have been thin enough to punch through. He hoped, he prayed, *not thin enough*.

"Shit!" Chad flung the phone on the couch.

Joe's attention returned to the front window, where gibgoblins now pounded. "They're going to get *i-i-i-in!*"

"Not through there." Chad eyed the TV. "The big windows are insulated. I installed 'em myself." He swooped down, seized the power strip where all the lines ran from the

entertainment center--which had *way too many* cabinets for comfort--and he yanked out the plug. "Laminated tempered glass. The good stuff. Three sheets. They're vicious little bastards but they ain't that strong." He rose, wound the sledgehammer back. "I couldn't shatter it with *this*. Speakin' of which, stand back!"

"What? What are you--"

"*Back!*" Chad barked, and Joe drew back against a wall with Kirsten. "Thank you!"

The hammer smashed the TV with splintering boom and shotgun discharge of glass.

"*Are you crazy!*" Joe yelled. "*What are you doing!*"

"Everything I can!" Chad took hold of the hefty entertainment center, used the wall for leverage, and sent it booming to the floor. "I ain't got time to explain!" He stepped up onto it to hurdle it, stumbled when pain bolted through him, and he crashed into the doorway to the bedrooms. Panting, he bit back the pain and shivered as a cold flash swept through him. "I'm gonna take care of that window. Keep an eye on the other side of the house! If you see any of those things inside..."

What? What are they gonna do?

"Scream real loud," he finished, and carried on.

He staggered into Kirsten's bedroom where he hit the switch. His gaze swept first to the broken window, where the branches jutting in thrashed in the wind which shrilled inside, and then to a scattering of children's books.

Take a good look, Mister Hoad. Why couldn't you write that? Why couldn't you write about rainbows and unicorns and fairy princesses. Why this shit? For the love of Christ, why this?

An exasperated sigh left him.

"Goddamn it. I hate writers."

Chad motioned for the bed, of which he meant to use the mattress and box-spring to block off the window, and flinched at movement below him.

The drafts fluttered the hair of the dolls that were assembled on the floor with a teddy bear.

Their eyes were black holes, pinholes into the Grim where pale things flashed in passing.

The gibgoblins couldn't pass through those little openings but Chad saw a closet, a dresser, cabinets, a lidded toy box, all kinds of things that could mean trouble.

It'll take me forever to gibgoblin proof everything in this room, and there still IS the rest of the house!

He changed his strategy, and drew back through the door. He locked it, closed it in front of him as he stepped back into the hall.

He brought the hammer down on the doorknob he had installed, bent it down and the mechanisms inside. He gripped the knob, pushed, tried hard to open the door, but it wouldn't budge, busted in a locked position.

"Good enough." He hurried across the hall to do the same to the door to the master bedroom and full bath.

2

It was all too much too fast for Joe Rendell, who didn't know what to do with the hurricane of conflicting emotions blowing through him. He didn't know whether he was coming or going, about to die or wake from a crazy dream. He hoped it was a dream and yet prayed it wasn't, because his granddaughter was in his arms now and that was a gift he wouldn't want taken away, even if that meant *the devils* he saw outside were really there. Even if that meant *he* was really there, in William's house while it was being trashed by Chad Hyman, who seemed to have gone out of his mind, maybe

and understandably driven to it by the abominable things now trying to break into the house.

Covered in blood and filth and reeking of death, Chad had looked almost as monstrous as the creatures, which he had called *gibgoblins*. That word had only now fully registered but made little sense to Joe. He had read the Hoad books years ago, couldn't resist, absolutely had to knowing that he might well have been playing with his friend Gary in the Hoad living room or out in the yard while those words came to be. But those had been words about worlds and things that never were, things that existed only in the mind of Ed Hoad.

The things outside, wanting to come in and do unspeakable things, were not imaginary.

In shock, dreaming, writhing in the restraints of a padded room somewhere, Joe didn't know what he was.

"I was so worried," Joe told Kirsten, his voice unsteady. "I missed you *so much*. Whole bunches." He flinched when a gibgoblin flung itself against the picture window, sudden but thankfully to little effect. "Me and your daddy have b--"

"Daddy's with Mommy in Heaven now," Kirsten said, her tone so matter-of-fact that it chilled him.

It strangled his heart, because he suddenly had no doubt that it was the truth. "Why do you think that?"

"General told me and he was sad and said he was sorry." She started to cry again. "He told Betty I was hers so she would save me from the monsters. But General didn't know she was going to keep me."

"What happened to your daddy?" Joe asked, but had a feeling he knew, given the horrors gathering outside.

Hysterical, Kirsten told him: "General said he's sorry that Daddy got sad. General said he lost his hop. He lost his hop."

(Hope. He lost his hope.)

"And General said they got him. The muh-muh-monsters..."

"General said?" Then Joe remembered her imaginary friend. "What did Betty do? Why did Betty have you?"

"She called me Annie."

"She had a baby named Annie who died."

"Uh-huh."

"Where's Betty now?"

A fresh batch of tears spilled from Kirsten's eyes. "The monsters. They... they..."

"Shshsh. It's okay, pumpkin. I've got you. I'll protect you." Joe hugged her tight, eyeing the abominations through the picture window and wondering if he really *could* protect her.

Chad emerged from the doorway, drawing the attention of every hellish thing on the other side of the glass.

All their black eyes were on him.

Joe noticed and was sure Chad did too.

That's who they want.

"Stay put." Chad grabbed the drapes and pulled them closed as if to say *Pay no attention to the demons behind the curtain*. "I hear 'em comin' around the house, but they won't get past the bedrooms. I'm gonna take care of the rest of the h--"

Lightning boomed with a trailing roar that shook the house and flickered the power.

Chad stepped over a corner of the toppled entertainment center and crossed in front of Joe.

"Thank you," Joe said. "I prayed God would bring her back. I suppose you'll have to do."

"I appreciate that," Chad said, lumbering by, "but don't put me in the same class, cuz I've been to Hell and brought the damned place back with me." He knocked pictures and shelves off the wall on the way to the dining room. "This is my fault!"

My goddamn fault!"

"Betty disappeared," Kirsten said in Joe's ear. "She disappeared. Don't let me disappear."

"Shsh, I've got you, sweetie," he said, as Chad left eyeshot and caused a ruckus in the kitchen. "You didn't tell me why you told Betty you were hers? Why did you do that? Did you tell her you were Annie?"

"General did. General!"

"General's not real sweet-pea, so who--"

"He is real!" Kirsten pitched back from his shoulder, her eyes wide and pleading, fixed on his. "You know him, Grandpa! You know him!"

"Cuz you told me about him, honey, but I can't see--"

"He sees you," Kirsten said, and Joe trembled, not at the words but of that powerful feeling rising up at him, that *knowing* and *waiting* for something that had not yet happened but soon would. "Did you lose a cap, Grandpa?"

"A cap?"

"*He wants to know where'd your cap go?*" Kirsten said, making Joe's knees tremble under his weight and eyes slowly widen, like doors making clearance for whatever he felt rolling forward in his mind. "*Where'd your cap go? He says you were a little boy!*" Her voice rose. It was fraying, urgent, wanting to be believed. "*He says you look funny and different! But General sees the little boy too, Grandpa! He sees the little boy! Joey! He sees Joey, Grandpa!*"

(Joey. The little boy with the coonskin cap.)

(Colonel Joey.)

The realization struck then, a connection he couldn't have fully made before now. It nearly knocked him off his feet as it channeled deep inside him, deeper than his bones and the marrow of those bones, deeper than even the great sadness he had carried in his heart for so many years, down through those

dark clouds to where the sun always shined and Pepper was always barking and frolicking, down where two boys played with army figures in the vibrant green grass of a side yard and the magic of childhood still lived in defiance of age and the years that had seemed to separate Joe and his one great friend Gary Hoad but never really did, never really could.

Down where the past was alive, rising, coming to.

A word left him in a shuddering gasp: "*General.*"

3

Unseen to Kirsten and Grandpa Joe, a gibgoblin had received *the sledgehammer treatment* in the kitchen. The blow had sent it flying against the low cupboards. It hit the floor with a mewling noise that stopped after Chad kicked its face in with his steel-toe boot. Its body deteriorated, leaving behind a green glow that clung faintly to the hammer head.

It also left behind the disturbing question of what it climbed out of, which drove Chad crazy with dread and sent him scrambling to secure the kitchen.

He ran a broom handle through the handles of cupboards. He pulled out the refrigerator, turned it around, and muscled it back into position with the door pinned against the wall. He fumbled through a junk drawer for anything useful, found a roll of packing tape he wished was duct-tape, and used it to secure the door to the oven, the dishwasher, and microwave.

Gibgoblins made the openings known as they groped and giggled through them. Out of a drawer, out of the mouth of the garbage disposal, they were like hellish leaks that kept springing out of a dam Chad worked furiously to seal. He swept a knife from a wall-mounted holder and went into a frenzy, slashing and stabbing arms and clawed hands.

Blood flew and giggles became squeals.

A healthy giggle rattled off from nearby, the sound damp

but booming with a metallic echo. He followed the sound into the cramped laundry room that had one high window, shelves of supplies, a stock-pile of clothes hangers, and a washer and a dryer that stirred--the source of the giggling.

"Godda..." He wedged hampers between the dryer door and the wall, cranked the dryer dial, and hit START.

The gibgoblin screeched.

Its body thumped and thumped and thumped...

"This is ridiculous..."

Having worked on the property thoroughly after Abby Arnell died, Chad knew the house well and how many ways the gibgoblins might get in. Too many ways. He knew he fought a losing battle, but he would fight the good fight to the end, a terrible end that he now believed inevitable.

When he motioned to walk out, his eyes stuck on the metal hangers that would be useful and grabbed a bunch on the way out.

He stopped in the doorway and scanned the kitchen windows that flashed with light and dreadful life. Gibgoblins crowded around them, stepping over one another, peering into the kitchen, pounding the glass with the pads of their inhuman hands, their claws screeching hideously against it.

In the window over the sink appeared the gibgoblin king, the organic prongs dangling from its jaw leaving slimy trails on the glass.

His insides shook as the king growled: *"Chaaaaaaaad."*

The raspy nasally voices of the others joined in chanting chorus: "Chaaaaad, Chaaaaad, Chaaaaad..."

Come on out, Chad, he imagined them thinking. *We want to thank you for letting us into the world. We want to thank you the only way we know how. And you'll deserve it, Hammer Man. Oh yes, you'll deserve everything.*

"Chad?" a voice said near him, giving him a start.

The voice came from Joe as he crept through the doorway carrying Kirsten, who cried into the side of his neck.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"They're in the backyard now too," Chad said, pale.

Joe nodded, pausing. "And they ... know your name."

"Chaaaaad, Chad, Chaaaaad..."

A high cupboard flew open, clawed hands lobbed dishes, and Joe slammed the cupboard door on gibgoblin arms.

Screaming with Kirsten, Joe held it as *they* groped.

Chad stomped forward, tossed the hangers on the counter, and stabbed the appendages with the knife. They retreated back in except for one which he impaled, nailing it to the neighboring cupboard door. "Damn these things!"

He snatched up a hanger, which he bent, wrapped around cupboard handles, tightened.

"Who did you try to call? The police?"

Chad thought of Buck and the terror of what might be happening miles away ran amok through him all over again.

"No. But it wouldn't have been such a bad idea."

"I called them when you were outside smashing something," Joe said, and Chad didn't blame him. "They should have been here by now. They could show up any time."

Or they did and left after one look at what's outside.

"The storm prolly has them busy." Chad secured more cupboards by binding handles together and shot a glance at the fire extinguisher across the kitchen. "Lotta sirens. Lotta lightning. Maybe a fire. Who knows."

"I called them after the phone died," Joe said, drawing Chad's gaze. "I used William's cell phone. It was hard to keep a signal. It died many times." Joe produced it from his robe pocket. "I did get through eventually."

Chad snatched it from his hand and fought with it, all the while shooting glances around for trouble.

Looking repulsed, Joe watched the creatures in the

window, who still chanted Chad's name. "You don't really think those are gibgoblins, do you? From the book?"

"You read the book?"

"Years ago. I had a personal interest."

"You've got one up on me because *I didn't read the damn book.*" Chad rambled while he tried to get the cell phone working. "I had people tell me about it and I don't think they're really gibgoblins. I know. I've been in the Grim and it ain't a pretty place. That thing I smashed was a freezer, the door to it. Not that it makes a damn difference now. I didn't follow the damn script. I left the Grim, but there were hundreds of those things down there. Hundreds."

"A freezer?"

"Came from the Hoad house, I think."

Joe's eyes lit up in recognition. "Gary's dad kept his liquor in the freezer."

"Gary? Who the hell's Gary?"

"General," Kirsten moaned into Joe's neck. "*His name is Generallll.*"

"Shsh, it's okay," Joe said to her, stroking her hair, and frowned at Chad. "He was my friend when I was a boy. Then his pa ... lord."

"I don't think Ed Hoad killed his family like they say." Chad passed him, hoping to catch a better signal in the living room. "These things did. Maybe he did in a way. The Grim was Ed Hoad's. It was like being in Hell and the hell in that man's head at the same time."

"It was a story. Stories don't come to life."

"I'll tell you what I think. Them creatures were metaphors for his demons, but these demons, real demons took the shape of those creatures." Chad paced with the phone. *Come on, find a signal you bitch.* "Cuz they did, they play by the same rules. Maybe I'm just chock-fulla shit, but

everything's working just like it was written in that gibgoblins book. Even the storm."

"What's the storm got to do with it?"

"I don't know." Chad growled at the phone. "This thing ain't gonna work. Shit!"

Maybe they're fine, he told himself, trying hard to convince himself. *They're after you. The game is still on. You started it and the bastards still wanna finish. They're chanting your name. They want you back in the ring.*

"There wasn't a storm at the end of that book," Joe said. "So the storm can't have anything--"

"Donald Prater said there was a storm at the..." Chad froze, voice trailing off. "Wait."

"Don from the library?"

"Wait. Lemme think."

Glass shattered and a racket ensued beneath them.

"The basement," Joe said.

Chad charged through the dining room, past the opening that looked into the kitchen, past the door to the laundry room where a gibgoblin still squealed in the dryer and thumped and *thumped* and thumped. His boot snagged on the carpet, turning his run into a stumbling one, and he threw himself against the door to the basement stairs that he heard the gibgoblins storming up in a giggling riot.

"Joe! Get my ham..." He saw the knob wasn't the same. It opened out from the stairs and it didn't lock.

"Hammer?" Joe asked.

"No. A chair!" Chad grimaced as the door thrashed against his back and knob jerked in a frenzy of clicks and clacks, removing any doubt that gibgoblins knew the mechanics of opening doors. "Chair from the kitchen!"

While Joe fetched it, Chad raced through his meeting with Prater in his head and remembered Prater asked:

Did your wife tell you about the storm?

Chad remembered responding that Trish hadn't and not much else, but knowing Trish *should have told him* was enough. She hadn't read The Gibgoblins, but...

"The storm was in The Jasmanglers," he thought aloud, and remembered a lot more of his conversation with Trish about that than the one with Prater. "Jasmanglers!"

Joe brought a chair. "What does that mean?"

"*Absolutely jack shit!*" Wedging the door, Chad pulled the chair tight against it, top under the doorknob and legs taut against the carpet. "It has to be a coincidence. There might be gibgoblins, but there ain't no jasmanglers."

"I don't mean to sound crazy--" Joe started.

"We're all gonna die," Chad said, causing Kirsten's crying to go up in treble. "Go ahead and sound crazy."

"The devil can choose a form he pleases, right?"

"If you say so. What are you getting at?"

"If demons chose this form, then they have to take all that comes with it," Joe said. "Maybe jasmanglers are one of the things that--"

"You've officially flipped, Grandpa Joe." Chad passed him. "We're not in fantasy land!"

"Weren't the jasmanglers supposed to restore balance when things went out of whack?"

Lightning struck close by.

The lights flickered and house went black.

The only electricity now ran through the powerhouse in the sky, but there was still a kind of power on the ground, a different kind of power that charged the air and pulsated through everything. Chad felt it rise and he had a feeling Joe did too.

"They kill other monsters," Chad said. "And Trish said that book ended on a doomsday note, because the jasmanglers are monsters too."

"They were monsters because of who summoned them."

"Well, on that note, maybe the goddamned gibgoblins are Ed Hoad's jasmanglers. See, we're one step closer to having this all figured out *before we die*, which is good, because I've got this funny feeling we're gonna die real soon..."

Lightning flickered on Joe pointing indignantly toward the kitchen. "If something made it possible to bring the gibgoblins to life, don't you think it could have also made it possible for other things too?"

"Such as jasmanglers." Chad remembered Prater correcting him that there *had* been gibgoblins in The Jasmanglers book, but they hadn't been called by name. "Say you're right. What now? I can't make 'em appear."

He wished he could.

(When you call the jasmanglers, there's always a price,) Trish had said. (Like your sanity.)

Pay the price? Sure I'll pay the price! But I ain't got much of that sanity thing to spare right now. Take a rain-check. An IOU. I'm good for it. I'll gladly pay you Tuesday for a jasmangler today.

"Even if these things could appear, the person who calls these things has to be a person of imagination. I can be a pretty imaginative guy." Chad punched the wall. "But I don't think I'm the kind of guy Hoad had in mind!"

A sour mental voice added, *He sure wasn't thinking of you when he made Sam Blainey either.*

Kirsten went from crying to screaming again, maybe because of the dark, maybe because Chad was getting ugly.

"You know what? Fine! The cops aren't here so let's call the jasmanglers!" Chad stomped through the kitchen where he retrieved his hammer. "All we need is a spell book and a soul of divine magic. Suppose William stocked up on any of those?"

"Sarcasm isn't helping us either!" Joe barked.

"Nothing can!" Chad wrenched the drapes away from the window, letting in light and opening up the view of the gibgoblins assembled there, which Joe drew back from. "Take a good look!"

Joe grimaced. "Don't you dare give up hope!"

"I don't know what to do!" He felt a tugging on the hammer, as if it were drawn by a magnet. "I don't have any answers! I ain't got a game plan! They're gonna get in here eventually! They want..." His voice dropped off.

They want to take me to Deadsville. Me.

Joe blinked pensively. "Close the drapes again."

"Why? They'll still be there."

"Quit the stubborn rubbish and just close them."

Chad did. "Now you see 'em. Now you don't."

"Your hammer. It's glowing."

Chad hefted it up and between flashes through the back window saw that the head was. Subtle, but definitely glowing green. "What the hell. It did that in the Grim too. After I clobbered those things..."

"What?"

"It went away, but I just killed one in the kitchen."

Chad pulled open the drapes again and lowered the hammer, which he moved closer to the window, closer to the gibgoblins behind it, and felt the tug again.

I stand corrected. We are in fantasy land.

He chewed on that, listened to the creatures repeating his name, and a ghost of a strategy came to mind.

"I've got a buddy outside somewhere." Chad closed his eyes, which felt tired and it took effort to open them again. He tottered slightly as his head swam. "I left him in the jeep. I have to know what happened to him. He might be dead, but he might not be too, because I think it's me the gibgoblins want. Right now, it's me. These things could be going

anywhere, but they're not. They're right here. I must be a gate or something and they're not free to roam until they open it. We have to finish what we started in the grim. That is the only explanation that makes any kind of sense right now."

"What are you going to do?" Joe looked alarmed.

"You can hole up in the half bath. Safest place to be. One door you can lock from the inside in case the gib--"

"You're going to leave us in here?"

"*Don't go!*" Kirsten cried. "*Don't leave us!*"

"I think I can draw them away and buy you time till the police come." *And they're done shitting their pants*, he thought, but didn't add. "It's the best chance you've got."

Joe shook his head, trembling. "They're going to get in here. We can't stay here."

"You'll be safer in here than you'll be out there."

"William's car is here. I have the keys. If we get to the car--"

"You've seen how many of those monsters are out there!" Chad snapped a look back toward the bedrooms, which had been breached. He heard the doors jostling. "You won't make it to the car. Those things'll tear both of you apart. That's suicide. You're talking crazy!"

"And you going out there isn't?"

"It's all we've got. Listen to them. Listen!"

(Chaaaaad, Chaaaaad...)

"I'll lead them away," he said. "You have to trust me, Joe. I wouldn't do it if I didn't think it would work."

"*The knight can't leave the princess!*" Kirsten cried, chanted. "*We gotta stay in the castle!*"

"Honey, I'll be back," Chad told her. "I'll be back for both of you." He looked at Joe. "The alternative is I stay and we wait for them to overrun us. I've still got my friend and my wife and son to think about too. It's the best way."

"Don't g-o-o-o," Kirsten said, hysterical again. "*Wait!*"

General says you gotta wait!"

"I wish that was true." Cold sweat ran down Chad's face and he gasped a few breaths, trying to ward off the sensation of wanting to faint. "Joe. This is for the best. The only damned way I can protect you from the danger is to lead it away."

"You don't look so good."

"I'm fine. *And it will work.*" Chad wished he was as confident as he sounded. "It has to. But we're runnin' out of time. The time for action is now. It's now. Or never."

Joe looked like he wanted to argue further, but sighed as if in surrender. "What about the window in there? That's where I watched you from earlier."

"Keep it shut and latched and you'll be fine. It's wire-glass." Chad headed for it. "I had to improvise last time I replaced it."

"Okay." Joe followed him toward the front bathroom. "What about you? How will you get out? What will you--"

"Let me worry about me." And Chad did plenty. "You worry about you and that little girl."

4

The small bathroom was pitch black except when the lightning flashed, which fortunately for the sake of Joe's nerves happened often. Before Chad had left him and Kirsten, locked the door and pulled it closed without a word, he had ripped the medicine cabinet off the wall and chucked it in the living room. Now Joe saw other possible dangers, thinking on the same wavelength, not to mention thinking that the world had surely gotten bad when you couldn't trust things as innocent as a cabinet under a bathroom sink or a toilet.

He bound the cabinet handles with gauze bandage,

tightened, knotted it, brought it around again, did the same until he expended the roll. As for the toilet, Joe doubted a gibgoblin could squeeze itself out of it, but it was better to be safe than sorry. He took the only course of action that came to mind. He put the lid down and sat on it with Kirsten, who had settled down into a curious silence.

Lightning flashed her face, which could hardly be believed now to have belonged to a girl who was five. Her face looked too pensive for that, her eyes too dreamy and even dark as they wandered. It was the face of an adult with weighty things on her mind and thoughts that she was trying to arrange. As heartening for Joe to witness as it was haunting, it was the face of her mother. It was the face of Joe's daughter, Deborah, not when she had been a little princess herself but when she was older, a young lady who was meticulous and contemplative as she made her way through a world that she couldn't have known had afforded her so little time.

Kirsten seemed to be listening.

Joe did that too, listened hard to gain some inkling of what was going on. He heard little over the storm, the otherworldly chattering outside, and most disturbingly the chatter *inside* the house.

He wondered how long before all that separated them was the locked door in front of him.

Don't let them through if it comes to that, Joe thought to The Big Guy. *Protect us from this evil. Protect both of us. I'm all she's got now.*

His heart leaped when he heard the click of the front door lock. Then came the sound of the door opening, a jump in volume of the giggling from outside which drowned in a loud hissing noise, and the door slammed.

God help him too. He'll need all the help he can get.

Joe feared for that man who had tried to protect him and

Kirsten, and who blamed himself for what was happening. Whether he did it justly, Joe gave him the benefit of doubt because he could tell Chad was a good man and was doing everything he could.

How could he go out the front door with all those demons out there? Dear Lord, protect him too.

He twitched when Kirsten spoke from the dark.

"He will be okay now." Her voice was neutral, collected, adult, unnerving. "What happens is supposed to happen. Even if it's bad. But he's okay."

"Kirsten?"

"Daddy had to be with Mommy. Daddy couldn't live without Mommy. *It was supposed to happen.* Everything is supposed to happen." Kirsten was a smart girl, well ahead of others her age, undoubtedly from all the brainy genes she inherited from her parents, but what Joe heard in her voice went beyond that. It verged on the unnatural. "He was too sad. He couldn't be happy."

"Your daddy loved you."

"I know, but I want to go home with you. Can you be my daddy now?" She sounded a little more like herself now, but a calm had taken the place of tears. "Can I live with you?"

"Of course you can. You will." He smiled wistfully. "I love you more than anything in the whole world." He kissed her head. "But can I still be Grandpa Joe?"

Kirsten nodded, lightning flickering on her eyes that were ungodly wide and unsettling with what Joe first mistook as raw terror. That would have been utterly appropriate, but there was more wonder in her eyes than fear.

There was a sobering awe, as if something gigantic and powerful had risen impossibly before her eyes, an unstoppable force of nature whose wrath only rivals its beautiful might, a power one cannot help but to marvel and fear as it

overshadows all else, towering and dwarfing worlds.

It was not what Kirsten saw, but felt.

Joe knew she felt it, because he did too.

"What is it, sweet-pea?" he said, his voice shaking and small. "Don't be scared."

"I'm not scared," Kirsten said matter-of-factly.

"Everything is going to be okay. Colonel Joey has to tell them to come out. They're here."

"Who's here?"

She turned her head very slowly.

"The jaza-manga-wers are here."

T W E N T Y - T H R E E

A STORM OF JASMANGERS

1

Reaching through miles of charged air, lightning struck a utility pole near the Vineyard County Sheriff's office, causing a brown-out as Deputy Castillo hurried down a hall.

Ahead of him, a deputy named Louis Coon stepped out of the break room with a cup of coffee and froze, looking absurdly guilty. "Damn, John. You look like you're gonna slap somebody upside the head and it better not be me cuz I was just called in when I was nice and comfy and I was--"

"It's gonna be you slapped upside the head if you don't get out of my way," Castillo said. "And you got nothin' better to do when there's Pandemonium goin' on out there?"

"See. Uh-huh. There you go. Busting on me. Like I said--"

"Coffee?" Castillo stopped. "Coffee made in there?"

"What? Coffee? No, there ain't no..."

Castillo stomped into the break room.

"Hey, now. I'm not going to be held responsible for you falling off the wagon this time. Em-mmm. I'm telling you right now. Don't do it."

"I'm doin' it. I need it." Castillo seized a cup from the dispenser and filled it. "I cut down on the drinkin' and I haven't had coffee in six months, six months, but I've been working my ass off on little sleep and tonight is crazy. It's just crazy."

"You've got that right. I've never seen a storm like this."

"You never met my ex-wife." Castillo slurped coffee.

"I saw some freaky colors up there I ain't never seen. I'm waiting for Ming the Merciless to come down."

"The way this storm is hanging over the valley is something. You know, there wasn't a drop of rain in Adamstown. I was all the way out there when I got a call on my cell from Joe Rendell at the Dudley place in Sutton Valley. The call kept cutting off but he told me enough. That Chad Hyman loony-tunes was up there, after I told him to stay away, and he was destroying something. Evidence, I think. Maybe that damn freezer he kept yammering on about. The son of a bitch is probably gone by now. I called Kemp in the valley to check it out and I should have known better and I also sent Schimmel up there, but nobody's heard a thing from him. It's gotta be this weather. Everything's a mess." He drank more of the coffee. "Oh, sweet Jesus, I missed you..."

"Now come on, John, what the doctor tell you about the coffee? You've been killin' yourself with the Dudley case and--"

"That's right and that missing girl is a hell of a lot harder on my heart than the coffee. I need it. To hell with the arrhythmia."

Castillo thought of the two bottles of beer that had been in his fridge for weeks and planned to cave on those too when this night was over. If it was ever over.

Vineyard County was no stranger to thunderstorms off the lake, a notorious nursery for blizzards and big boomers, but the monster that owned the skies that night was better suited to the mid-west. The storm had wreaked havoc all over the county. Security and car alarms were going off everywhere, tripped by the ground-shaking thunder and bouts of hail big enough to break windows. Four wards in Sutton Valley alone were without power. The number of lightning strikes was unprecedented. They had scorched trees, caused

three fires, fried a transformer, but had hit only one person so far--one poor busboy who had been struck in the back lot of a restaurant, was in stable condition, and had a new reason to quit smoking. Beyond all this, the weather had caused a scattering of traffic accidents, one of which involved a familiar name.

The Barksdale PD reported that Padget Pengsy had left the scene of a smash-up on Norris Road, allegedly violent, intoxicated, and brandishing a knife. This had sent Castillo's mind scrambling to connect the dots and he considered now that Pengsy might have been Chad Hyman's partner in more things than work. Did Pengsy have an alibi for the time frame William Dudley disappeared? He would have bet the farm against it. Was Pengsy's incident on Norris Road during the same night that Hyman was up to no good at the Saybrook property a coincidence? He would have bet against that too, even if he didn't have all the pieces to put it together yet.

"The lines are down so I can't get through to the Saybrook place. Hyman could still be there and there's no telling what that nutcase is capable of. I'm heading up there now." He walked for the door. "You're my assist. Let's go."

Louis followed him, looking wary. "Up there in this weather? That's gonna be spooky."

"What do you mean spooky? No, don't tell me. You're another one of those superstitious types. If you got stories about hobgoblins and the Hoad house that was there, I don't want to hear about it."

"Hoad House nothin'. There's been bad things happenin' on that hill since the first settlers of that valley. Bad grounds up there. My grandfather used to tell stories about the Indians--"

"Shsh." Castillo stopped and then drifted to the door to the Dispatch Room. "Did you hear that?"

"Just another weather warning. They just came out with a flash flood."

"No, I thought I heard..."

A static-laden voice announced: *"The National Weather Service in Buffalo, New York, has issued a tornado warning for southwest Vineyard County..."*

2

In the distance along the lakeside, a slice of starry sky opened in the wake of the storm. Clouds hung low at its tail end and dragged phantom tendrils. Lightning strobed something dangerous and alive in the thunderheads. Swirling shafts rose and fell. Lightning arrowed, branched through the dream-haunted sky, ripped through the air with unrelenting fury, and met the ground in multiple strikes, punishing the valley below that was a sea of chaos.

The whistles from fire houses joined the howl of the wind, the alarms going off from shaken buildings, cars pelted by hail, and the sirens from the fire engines and police cars. The sounds weaved into a ghastly chorus.

Then came a Sutton Valley town siren not heard since the fifties, wailing from the harsh throat of the night.

Chad Hyman had heard this sound without processing it, as he had taken his pause inside 32 Saybrook to gather up all that he had left in him. With an old fire extinguisher from the kitchen at his feet and hammer in his hand, he stood in the light flickering in from around the edges of the front door. His ears were attuned to *them* as *they* giggled, jabbered, and chanted his name from behind the door.

From the kitchen, their sounds also came. For now, it was only their voices, but soon enough their bodies would follow through the windows they were shattering. Time was running out. He had only these few moments.

There's so many of them out there, he thought, fighting the fear that threatened to consume him. *So many. How many demons can one man have?* He stared hard at the door. *I'm tired. I'm bleeding. Hundreds of demons want to rip me apart. I face impossible odds of success.* His brows lowered. *Such is life. If this is the end the fates want and it's my destiny to go down this way, so be it.* He narrowed his eyes and clamped his teeth. *But I will not go down quietly, you sons-a-bitches. I will not ... go quietly.*

He raised the hammer.

A tool he had used time after time to help work out his demons, drive them out, the hammer long had that purpose. Held that magic for him. Good magic. The best.

It felt *perfect* in his hand.

It felt *right*.

"Are you ready?"

He set it down, head to the floor.

Not too close to the door. Not too far.

Its long handle waited.

Ready.

Under his breath, he murmured: "Jasmangler..."

He leaned toward the door. His left hand gripped the extinguisher, positioning the nozzle, and lifted it. His right hand pulled the safety pin and turned the lock on the knob of the door.

The door slammed against his shoulder before the gibgoblins could open it too far.

Let's get it on, boys.

Chad planted his boot to catch the door again.

It rushed in as soon as he pitched back.

The fire extinguisher blasted out.

Giggles turned to squeals and raucous cries of surprise. He grabbed the hammer and snared the edge of the door with

the head, as he hosed the gibgoblins down with the extinguisher. He swept them back from the door, which he pulled closed with a great tug of the hammer, as he advanced.

Awe crashed over him at sight of the creatures, the sea of more than a hundred that jam-packed the yard and rushed him. His terror turned inside out in an explosion of rage.

Screaming, Chad charged and sprayed and swung.

The hammer whooshed, bashed in a chest with a wet crunch, whipped back and around as he swept the razor cold spray, and the hammer crashed into a gibgoblin's face with a splintering crash of bone and hail of teeth.

Gibgoblins hissed, groped, dove, scrabbled for his legs and for the extinguisher, only to be driven back by its burning cold discharge, sent stumbling blind and squealing, sent to the ground stunned or convulsing in fits of agony, all of these things kinder than what happened to those in the *wrath* of *the hammer*.

It knew where to go, even as he swung blind in the white cloud that he had stirred up with the extinguisher.

The hammer punished. It aimed. It *glowed*.

The sight of this did not dissuade the others from closing in, giggling idiotically and stepping over one another.

The hammer *pulled*, whooshed, *smashed*.

Every strike brightened its glow.

Every kill sharpened its aim for the next.

A gibgoblin lunged at his side and he brained it with the extinguisher.

"Come on! Follow me! Come get me, you bastards!"

Chad saw the throngs gravitating toward him, a fresh horde in Betty's yard doing the same, and more swarming around from behind the house.

It was working.

Blasting frost in wild sweeps, being flung by the will and might of the hammer that no longer felt like something

separate he held but an extension of himself, an appendage that had taken on a ferocious life of its own, Chad battled his way closer to the jeep. He saw a group of gibgoblins on it, chanting something else he couldn't make out. They jumped up and down on it. They battered it. They shook it.

"Pengsy!"

3

Pengsy heard Chad calling his name. He heard the chatter of the gibgoblins that mobbed the jeep, pounded on the windows and doors and the hard-top roof. Nothing he heard was processed by his mind, including the sound of his own voice. He had been screaming and gibbering like a lunatic ever since he came to. He didn't know how long ago that was.

His sense of time was gone.

Many things were. His head was full of fried circuits and severed wires, many still live, thrashing and spitting the sparks of child-like fear and terrible half memories that would assault his mind for many months to come, causing violent outbursts of wailing and struggling with restraints during his extended stay at the Fletcher Psychiatric Center.

"Baaaad puppet!" the gibgoblins said. *"Baaaad! No Doodyville for bad puppets! No Doodyv-i-i-i-lle!"*

Unprocessed, the words meant nothing.

The inside of the jeep meant nothing too, even as he struck buttons and knobs with his fumbling hands. Then, a lone thought occurred, a freak nerve jumped a broken synapse, a connection happened.

Laughing at nothing, screaming words unknown even to him, Pengsy scrambled behind the wheel and his violently trembling hand turned the keys in the ignition.

4

Chad heard the engine fire up.

Gibgoblins tumbled off as the jeep bolted in reverse. Headlights weaving and illuminating the lengthening trail of the wounded and squashed, the jeep tore backwards through the crowd, plowed gibgoblins down with splats and crackling snaps of bone.

"Pengsy!" Chad yelled, knowing he wouldn't be heard but pissed as hell that Pengsy might be high-tailing it with a perfectly good killing machine.

(He is. Goddamn him!)

"I'm gonna kick..." The hammer smashed through a gibgoblin skull, obliterating it in an explosion of charred substance and green sparks. *"Your a-a-a-ass!"*

Gibgoblins lunged at him when they saw openings. Those not struck leaped back with fright--for the first time *fright*--whenever the hammer drew anywhere near. The head no longer merely glowed with green light. The hammer blazed like a torch, hummed with power, and struck with fury. It was a warrior in its own right, a jasmangler brought to life that willed and wanted and fought.

In snatched glances through the haze of co2, Chad saw Pengsy bug-eyed and shrieking behind the wheel.

Though *"Chaaaaad!"* wasn't in the jeep, he hoped it would distract the mobs into chasing it anyway, but only a dozen or so did. A couple managed to take hold of it briefly as it zoomed wildly backward, zigzagging down the cul-de-sac to Saybrook Road, where it did not turn but zipped across and collided with a telephone pole.

The horrid crunch of impact made a far-flung part of Chad cringe and worry about his two best friends. Pengsy and *his jeep*. His goddamned jeep. To be waist-deep in doom,

fighting in the middle of Hell on Earth, and have even a flash of a bitch in his head about automobile repairs was beyond ridiculous. Not to mention: pointless.

He wasn't going to be around to worry about such trivial shit as how much the hick mechanics at the body shop were going to rape from his wallet. He saw no hope against the numbers swarming around him. All he saw was the weakening discharge of the fire extinguisher, a stadium worth of devils who had nothing but time to wait and pain to give, and a hammer with the power to destroy them one by one but could only be in so many places at once.

His feet left the ground as the hammer tugged him in a lunge and sweep that ripped through three gibgoblins at once, but there were many more where that came from.

Two hundred? Three hundred?

They were everywhere.

When he saw they had thickened the ring encircling him and closed in more determined, resilient, tolerant of the freezing jets that made them squeal and shudder but sent fewer down, Chad lobbed the extinguisher, which was almost expended anyway.

Both hands went to the hammer, which the gibgoblins still feared and rightly so as it *tore* through them.

All at once, as if given an order by the bastard king, they rushed and leaped into the circle of clearance that he had kept so well around him up to now.

Those in the circle grabbed, clawed, bit, were annihilated by the whirl of the hammer, which only opened the space for the next, and the next, and the next.

All the while, an image of The Fates kept flashing in his mind. The sisters moved, performed their business with the threads of life. He saw *his* thread and Atropos--the sister who wielded the final word, whose job was to *cut* with her gleaming

shears. He swore he saw her *wanting* to cut.

He raged against that image.

He raged against the gibgoblins.

And would take out as many as he could.

Screaming, berserking, he whirled and swung in a flurry of green fire and flying limbs, unaware that the ground had begun to quake.

5

The jasmanglers are here, Kirsten had said, and the power Joe felt rushing into the world heightened again, as if strengthened by the words alone.

Joe heard glass shatter in the kitchen, jangling onto the countertop and floor. Then came the tinkling of loose glass and thuds of *them* coming through the windows. Footfalls trailed through the house with the inhuman gabble of the gibgoblins.

They're in. Sweet Lord, they're here.

"Grandpa, hurry!" Kirsten sprang off his lap, causing his heart to leap and hands to snap out, clutching her.

"Where are you going?" Joe said quickly, breathlessly.

"You stay right here close to me. For God's sake--"

"You gotta tell the jaza-manga-wers!"

The footfalls rushed up behind the door, which the gibgoblins beat and joggled frantically, urgently, not as if there was merely a scared man and his granddaughter locked in that room, but a devastating bomb about to go off that they had to defuse.

"General says you gotta!"

"Can you hear him?" Joe asked, trembling with fear and from the energy rocketing through him like voltage with nowhere to go. "Can you hear General?"

"You can hear him too!"

"I can't."

"Hurry, Joey!" Kirsten cried, and the sudden switch from *Grandpa* or *Grandpa Joe* to *Joey* startled him. "Colonel Joey's gotta tell them!"

(Give the order, Colonel.)

"Attack," Joe Rendell said.

His voice carried no authority, no strength to command the power he felt flowing through him, eddying through the air, running through the floorboards and the walls, channeling through everything, shaking the world.

"Do it now, Joey." The voice that left the mouth of his granddaughter was not hers. It was a voice he knew and hadn't heard in a lifetime. It shined inside him and at long last awoke the dreams behind his eyes. *"You've gotta do it now, Joey!"*

In a mental flash flood, he thought of him and Gary carrying plastic Wild West guns through the woods with talks of Indians and tree-forts, riding bicycles, the formidably steep Saybrook Road that Joey faced almost every day to see his friend, the sound of them whooping as they coasted down that "wild ride", the way Gary's tongue hooked out a corner of his mouth as they grunted and struggled to peddle up it, both knowing they would give up half way and walk their bikes the rest. He thought of sunny days of playing army guys. He thought of trading baseball cards, popping Pez, board games, playing fetch with Pepper, dreaming, laughing, being together and living as much as possible every day and that being the only thing that mattered.

(Joey!)

That voice pulled him back to where it all started. It pulled him down inside himself where memories gleamed like gems, that special place inside everyone that can shine in the deepest darkness and make one smile in the most terrible of

circumstances, moments in time filled with wonder and innocence and dreams that jaded hearts mourn and long to know again, a place of magic that still lives and still works if only given the chance. The place that a soul calls home.

"Joeeeeeeeey!"

(It's not the Nazis today.)

(Who is it?)

(Don't ask. That information is secret, Colonel.)

Our army.

Our soldiers.

"The jasmanglers," Joe Rendell whispered.

Between lightning flashes of Kirsten's face, Joe did not see darkness, but sunlight illuminating the side yard of the Hoad house. He saw Gary kneeling in his slacks that were covered in dirt and grass stains. Below his bangs, his eyes were full of purpose and duty.

He saluted. "Give the order, Colonel."

Joe saw him.

Joey *felt* him.

Tears spilled before he shut his eyes.

And he rose.

The feeling of *power* did too. It shook the ground, the walls of the house, *the walls of reality* which had filled with a blazing magic ready to enter, ready to be called, invoked, commanded. Joe now knew it would be. In a moment, they would come. Trained and ready to fight with their weapons and hearts for all that's good and true, the jasmanglers would ambush from their encampments. The reinforcements would rise from their secret underground bunkers.

The army of General Gary and Colonel Joey would march one last time.

(Give the order, Colonel.)

He opened his eyes and bellowed at the top of his voice, which was not the voice of a sixty year-old man but a boy who

wore a coonskin cap, a boy who was still eight years old, still alive, and for as long as Joe Rendell's heart would beat in his chest, always would be:

"ATTAAAACK!"

6

The hammer incinerated every gibgoblin it touched in blinding flashes of green. The plague of gibgoblins mobbed him, jabbed claws, snapped teeth, until the thrashing of the earth became too great. They fell, tumbled over one another, stumbled and screeched. Chad crashed down on all fours, firmly on the ground yet feeling as if something held him in the air by the shoulders and shook him violently up and down.

What now? What the hell is happening now!

If he didn't know better, Sutton Valley was having an earthquake, a six or seven on the richter scale, or the hill harbored a secret volcano about to blow its stack.

Gibgoblins scrambled around him. He obliterated the legs out from under them with a wild sweep of the hammer, flung himself upright, and tottered for balance.

The ground blasted up by the tree line in a geyser of mud and weedy chunks, then beside the pavement of the cul-de-sac, then everywhere. Stones hailed down. Pockets of the ground burst up randomly all around, as if the force that shook everything was triggering long buried mines scattered throughout the clearing.

Another eruption happened yards away in a surge of mud, dirt, stones, and something large, which had been beneath the ground and punched through the surface. Solid, tall, green. Chad caught only a glimpse of it before the next eruption happened beneath his feet.

He let out a startled cry and fumbled the hammer during

the instant he stood on the square shoulders of whatever shot out of the earth. It thrust him high above the gibgoblins and sent him in a backward hurtle.

Flickering clouds bleared past his outstretched hands, his feet kicked up to a sea of jagged lightning, and he crashed down onto the mob. Bones cracked beneath him and squeals tore his ears before he slammed on the ground.

He heard heavy clicks and clacks that occurred to his mind as the strikes of typewriter hammers on a page, until the bullets started flying.

A running soldier flashed.

Someone called the army, Chad thought in a near delirious daze. *Good. Boy they got here fast.*

That unlikely thought was followed by another, which was a hair more probable given that the US military didn't typically rise out of the ground.

No one called the army. Someone called the jasmanglers in the form of the army. Who? Who called them?

Screeching gibgoblins ran past him and over him.

One didn't. It leaped on top of him, only to be perforated by the spray of a submachine gun.

Chad began to get up and froze, his eyes locked on the storm. His shock was not so much about the flock of shapes sailing the fierce winds, paratroopers descending from the green hell of clouds and lightning raging in the heavens, but a particular group of clouds up to no good.

They rolled and twisted into dark veins that lengthened, weaved, branched slowly but surely down.

Funnels.

"You've gotta be shitting me!" he yelled at the sky, at God, at Hoad, the Fates, whoever was responsible.

That's the last straw! his mind rambled. *That's it. I've seen the dead, fought monsters, been to Hell, murdered a freezer, saved a little girl, saw Jesus Christ pull a crazy lady*

through a painting, battled an army of demons, and that's just some of the highlights! I've had a very full night and this is where I draw the goddamn line! You all party way too hard for me and I'm taking my hammer and I'm going home!

"I am done!" he yelled at the sky. "I quit!"

A heavy click wrenched his gaze to a gun barrel jutting before a cylinder magazine. "Wait," he said quickly to the Thompson M1, a tommy gun in the hands of a soldier Chad barely glimpsed before the muzzle-flash ripped his vision.

He ducked hard and yelled, "*Goddammit*," his voice lost in the deafening bangs and rattling CLANK-CLANK-CLANK of the magazine. He flung himself forward and hurried on his hands and knees, fleeing, expecting his cries to be cut short and his brains to splatter the wet ground in front of him.

Screaming and disoriented, Chad advanced in a scrambling crawl toward the sledgehammer, which burned with green light like a fallen flare.

Almost there.

Gunfire rattled through the chaos. Bullets whizzed over his head every which way. A soldier hurdled him with a hard land and shower of casings that drummed his back.

The handle to the hammer close, Chad reached.

Another soldier erupted from the ground before him with an upburst of mud that splattered down and got in his eyes.

He pitched his head down for fear a stray round would blow it off. Another riot of gunfire assaulted his ears. He heard machine guns unleashing dozens of rounds a second and gibgoblins being torn apart.

Slowly, reluctantly, he raised his head back up to the soldier towering over him. His gaze climbed from its green boots, up the stiff wrinkles of its green pants, up its green uniform to its statue face, which was just as green as the rest of it.

Beneath its World War Two helmet, its eyes were mounds without irises.

The jasmanglers were not men but six-foot tall monsters with man shapes. They were golems wrought of hard plastic, army men toys that had come to life and grown shockingly life-size.

In the background, Chad saw gibgoblins on the pavement leap, latch onto, stubbornly bite at a group of soldiers who didn't seem to mind or notice as they strolled and mowed creatures down in droves.

The one standing over him raised a hand to the grenades hooked on its jacket. They all looked more like bulges with grenade shapes, until it removed one and pulled the pin with a very real *plink*.

"No fucking thank you!" Chad scrambled backward along the ground.

The soldier whirled and lobbed the grenade the other way. It sailed over the heads of spraying machine-gunners and plummeted toward a thicket of gibgoblins. The jasmangler did an about-face *salute* at Chad as the grenade landed with a bright green explosion of bones, guts, and flying gibgoblins.

Those clinging to the jasmanglers nearby were shredded, the jasmanglers untouched.

"*Glad to have you, sir!*" the grenade-thrower said, and the combined cheery tone with the bizarre contrast of a child's voice from the lips of that hulking horror scared Chad more than a stock demon voice ever would have. "*But you're dismissed from this field, soldier.*"

A low moan quivering in his throat, Chad nodded wide-eyed with the disjointed thought that the army would be one small outfit if they held basic training in the Grim.

The jasmangler plucked a new grenade, turned, and said as it walked away: "*We'll take it from here.*"

"I can live with that," Chad murmured, but doubted he would live for long. With all the rounds zipping through the air, it was a wonder he hadn't been hit yet.

He grabbed the hammer and recoiled when another jasmangler shot up nearby, dirt spilling off it as the heavy legs of a stand snapped out with clangs. It dropped with a sway of the chain-belt of ammo that dangled from a heavy machine gun, and the soldier opened fire at the gibgoblins and his comrades.

Nearby, a soldier speared a gibgoblin with his rifle bayonet and lifted it in the air, while another shredded it with a tommy gun and a paratrooper landed on the roof of 32 Saybrook, where it began firing down with a carbine.

Chad lunged into a stumbling run, heard rounds whistle past his ear, kicked a gibgoblin out of his path, swung the hammer which blasted and split another in two, changed his path when another grenade exploded, shot glances at the sky and the two funnels that wound down to the ground in the distance.

Doubly worried about Trish and Buck now, fearing Joe and Kirsten would be caught in the wrath of the jasmanglers, he ran, hoping but doubting he would make it back to the house in one piece.

From the ground rose another jasmangler that loaded a shell into the wide barrel of a *bazooka* it hoisted over its shoulder.

"Jesus Christ!" Chad dove.

The weapon discharged with a god-pounding boom and vaporized a group of gibgoblins running for the tree-line.

Running hunched over, Chad swept his gaze around.

"Castillo's prolly gonna blame me for this too!"

Jasmangler platoons swept bullets and dropped gibgoblins in an advance through what had become a

battlefield strewn with dissolving carcasses. They drove the bulk of the hordes into the woods. In the distance behind the trees, paratroopers were landing to cut them off.

Dozens of gibgoblins did not flee, but attacked the jasmanglers with little effect.

A group squealed out of nowhere and pounced on: "*Chaaad! Chad! Chad!*" They slashed, latched on, knocked him off-balance, and Chad tumbled with them into a jumble.

He body-slammed one, *the hammer* took out another, but three remained, holding on with their claws. Struggling but failing to get upright, he tore one gibgoblin off and groped for another.

Chad and the gibgoblins *stopped*.

Their attention was now on the jasmanglers that encircled them shoulder to shoulder in a formation that was normally a recipe for mowing each other down in a crossfire.

Chad worried about himself when they raised their rifles in unison.

The gibgoblins mewled, as if knowing what was coming.

His eyes sweeping, widening, Chad trembled. "Wait." They would shred him if they fired. "Don't shoot. Don't--"

His scream drowned in a hail of bullets that ripped the gibgoblins apart. Convinced this was the end, Chad felt the searing energy and saw blood and guts flying.

The firing stopped.

Madly, he swept the gelling remains off him and felt himself all around.

The bullets hadn't touched him.

Lowering their weapons, the jasmanglers around him saluted at once.

"Thanks," he said thinly, and grimaced at the prospect of having to shake the shit out of his drawers. "I think."

7

The jasmanglers infiltrated the house and annihilated the gibgoblins inside, many as they tried to flee to the windows whence they came. Squeals of painful death, clangs and clinks of shells and casings spilling to the floor, and the roar of weapons of war could hardly be categorized as happy sounds when heard by men of heart.

But Joe Rendell was laughing.

On his lap, Kirsten was too, as if it were contagious.

Had anyone else been there, they would have thought Joe had cracked his nut, unable to conceive that his laughter could have come from anywhere but a mouth of madness, rather than from a man possessed by a joy so great that it verged on impossible in a black hungry world where dreams are seldom realized at all, much less to this fabulous magnitude.

The gunfire died down and heavy feet clumped to the door.

Joe and Kirsten twitched with startled cries as a soldier kicked in the door.

Lightning flashed on the unit of soldiers in the hall.

They were life-sized toy soldiers.

His and Gary's soldiers.

One stepped in, lowered his rifle, and snapped up a hand in salute.

"We are relieved to find you unharmed, Colonel," the soldier said with Gary's voice. *"The first phase of our rescue mission is complete. Come with us."*

Joe rose, pale but smiling. "Gary?" he asked the soldier, whose face was fixed without expression. "Is that you?"

"We must evacuate you now," said the jasmangler. *"This area is contaminated. The soil is tainted, Colonel. This is a*

compromised zone. It must be swept and abandoned."

"Swept?"

"By order of the general."

Trembling, more with a strange excitement than anything else, Joe licked his lips. "And where is the good general?"

"Behind the lines, sir," the soldier said. *"He is always behind the lines."*

Joe nodded as tears rolled over his smiling lips.

"He always will be." The jasmangler stepped back. *"We will see you both to safety. With respect, Colonel, we must move now."*

Joe stifled a sob that came out as a quivering gasp and he raised his arm in salute. "Let's go."

T W E N T Y - F O U R

THE CIRCLE CLOSES

1

Deputy Castillo swerved up Saybrook Road and stepped on the gas. The headlights of the two cars behind him--Louis Coon's cruiser and the patrol car of Paul Kemp, who joined them en-route--flashed in the rear-view, as he listened to the lively radio chatter and worried about the storm's latest development.

Two tornadoes.

According to reports, the first was buzzing the rooftops of the commercial district, but weakening.

The second showed every indication of staying power on the last check. Gaining speed at thirty-five miles an hour, traveling northeast with an eastward lean, it ripped through the woods where houses were widely scattered but were *there* nonetheless. Any could be in the damage path of this menace, which had chosen to arrive in the middle of the night during the work week. He didn't know how anyone could still be asleep after the boomer rolled in and the town whistles went off, but feared some were.

Driving up the wooded road, Castillo approached the bend that came before the cul-de-sac.

A dispatcher radioed: "To any unit in proximity to the Sutton Valley Library, there's reports of a burglar alarm."

He grabbed the radio. "Castillo here. That's surely another false. Could be a window broken by hail or the wind. Knocks stuff over. Trips the motion detectors in the building.

Unless it took a hit from the tornado down there. Anyone still have a visual on that one?"

"It's gone," someone replied. *"Back up to God."*

Castillo did not hear that response, distracted by a visual of his own. His gaze swung to the frenzy of rapid flashes in the woods. Through the passing trees, running figures flashed and larger figures pursued with sweeping bursts of heavy weapons.

"What the hell." He pulled hard to the shoulder, yards away from the cul-de-sac and Chad Hyman's jeep across the road, smoking where it had crashed into a pole.

With a chirp of his siren, Deputy Louis Coon pulled his cruiser past and turned into the cul-de-sac where he braked. Officer Kemp parked his SVPD patrol car on the other side of the road, his spinning flashers sweeping the jeep with red.

"I need backup in the vicinity of thirty Saybrook in Sutton Valley," Castillo radioed, as he opened his door and clearly heard the gunfire, a full-on Mardi Gras of gunfire, now as loud as the rolls of thunder and rumbles from the storm. *"Multiple shots fired. Firefight ongoing. Unknown parties. Multiple perpetrators with heavy firepower in the woods east of the road. They've got automatics."* He scanned the woods which were dotted with muzzle flashes, and darted glances at Kemp, who scrambled out for the jeep. "I need emergency on standby. I want immediate backup from all available units and I want it *yesterday!*"

Something boomed with a flash on the trees across the road, making Castillo think of rocket propelled grenades.

"Special ops team too," he added. "In case I've gotta spell it out for ya. I'm..."

Tires screamed as the other cruiser bolted in reverse. It lunged off the cul-de-sac and slammed into the jeep's front end, bumping it over against Kemp, who stood pale and oblivious, body hunched by the passenger side as if he had

been looking into it, eyes now gazing across the road.

"*Louis*," Castillo radioed, watching him spin the steering wheel as crazily as he shook his head. "What are you doing? Just fall back till backup gets here! *You answer me!*"

In disbelief, he watched Lou peel out and accelerate away. Castillo did not like that reaction any more than the look of bewildered fright on Paul Kemp's face as he continued to stand frozen by the jeep.

Castillo keyed the radio again. "Assessing the scene. Stepping out now."

And he did.

While his adrenaline rose at the sounds of bullets rattling and ringing out, he hunkered beside his car. He pulled his pistol, checked the safety, and looked across the road at Kemp. "Is he in there! Hyman!"

No response.

"Kemp! *Is Chad Hyman--*"

"No!" Kemp did not look at him. "It's Pengsy! He's out! He's injured!" He said this matter-of-factly, not moving. No urgency. Just the facts. "He's bad!"

"*Then don't just stand there!*" Castillo barked. "Call it in! And for crissake, keep your head down! *Go!*"

Kemp moved stiffly toward his patrol car, walking sideways, not taking his eyes off whatever he saw that was out of Castillo's view.

Unable to see through the trees and hedges, Castillo used them for cover as he crept up for a view around the corner. He stopped, leaned, started at someone who stood there in front of him, facing the road, facing him.

Castillo stepped out and took aim. "Don't move."

He blinked behind his pistol.

Shock hit him in four waves.

The first was that what had been standing there wasn't a

someone at all, but a detailed statue of a soldier with a rifle. The second rang out in a chord of terror as the statue moved like a man and talked like a child, snapping out a hand when it said, *"This is a restricted area,"* to which Castillo startled and ushered in the third.

By pulling the trigger.

The bullet ripped through its hand, blew a hole through its neck, and swept away any notion of a flesh and blood man beneath some elaborate costume.

A stink of melted plastic lingered in the dank air as the soldier continued to hold out its hand. Two fingers dangled by gooey threads that lengthened, thinned, snapped, and dropped in the grass.

(What the hell am I looking at?)

"Stand down, sir," the soldier said, which seemed like a perfectly reasonable request. *"And stand by to receive Colonel Joey into the protection of civilian authorities. This zone is not secure."*

Castillo's mouth moved. If he was trying to scream, he had no breath left with which to do it.

The final wave of dumbfounded horror flooded the engines in his mind when he looked past the soldier and the tunnel of his vision burst madly out into a wide panorama of things that could not be.

The pavement and lawns were a combat zone of bizarre creatures being gunned down by soldiers that were neither flesh nor human despite of their shapes, the surrounding woods a gulf of gunfire and green explosions. Platoons disappeared into the trees. Two paratroopers sailed fast over the tree tops, descended into running landings across the Morgan driveway and lawn. Their chutes released and shriveled and blackened on the grass like plastic in fire. The windows behind them flickered with gunfire from inside. Two creatures fled out the door where they were torn apart by the

sweep of bullets that should have trailed the house with holes yet didn't. The bodies of the creatures dropped, rapidly decayed, and joined the remains that were strewn all around, everywhere, collapsing carcasses and bones and incandescent gunk that made the ground glow green. The same texture of light wavered in the clouds beyond the trees, broken by the tornado that bridged earth and sky.

A long black shadow of apocalypse.

Destroying, cleansing, hungry, alive, and moving with purpose, it closed the distance.

"The situation is under control." The soldier marched away, marched back into battle. *"Hold your position."*

Castillo was capable of nothing else. He had the air of a man in a late stage of Alzheimer's, not knowing where he was, who he was, what was happening, his body twitching involuntarily, his brows locked in the bottommost position. The look in his eyes teetered between supreme confusion and glimmers of realizations that wanted to dawn but wouldn't, connections that started and cut off.

His mind was a stalled engine that he kept trying to jumpstart. Each time it caught, it turned over what his eyes saw, tried to roll with it, make sense of it, identify it, see it from all angles of reason. He could not connect *these* dots. He did not know how to proceed, if that was possible, or if it was even needed in what had to be *a nightmare*. The reality that it absolutely was *not* a dream presented the conflict that shut everything down again.

Castillo felt the veins throbbing in his neck, heard the loud beat of his heart in his ears, and a fear hung in the background that it was about to stop.

2

From the woods echoed the sounds of a war almost done, missions almost completed, the tapering gunfire of the jasmanglers and squeals from the small and ebbing presence of the gibgoblins left in the world, as a rescue squad accompanied Joe and Kirsten out the rear door of the cape house. At their rushing heels, around the fallen tree, through the back yards where soldiers holding the territory saluted a Colonel, Joe hurried with his granddaughter.

Every step brought him closer to the road that blazed with flashing lights, yet the sound of sirens and war trailed away from him. The soldiers faded from his eyes, whose gaze slid to other views. Views of real places behind the veneer of reality or a place inside the hopeful heart of a good man who saw what he wanted to see, he did not know.

Night became day, the stormy sky an ocean of blue dotted with the kind of white clouds that take the shapes of ships and kingdoms and dreams in the minds of gazing children.

He ran against the breeze that smelled of October, carried leaves, jingled wind chimes in the back yard of the Morgans, to whom Joe shot backward glances as he ran on.

Young and vibrant, Betty looked up from the child she held in her arms. She stood beside her husband, who had one tattooed arm around her and kept the other busy flipping burgers on a grill. Cigarette tucked behind an ear, Roy cocked his head and gave a wink.

Betty smiled her face-lighting smile.

Around the house and to the front, Joe saw Henry and Martha Boggs as they had been in 1956. They stood at the corner of their yard near the foot of the driveway where Roy's Oldsmobile gleamed. A pipe in Henry's mouth and hat on his head, the curls of Martha's lush hair spiraling down around

her smile, they held hands and waved their free ones.

Joe looked past them.

Through falling leaves and dancing shadows of the trees across the pavement, at the end of the cul-de-sac, a crouching boy scratched the back of his dog.

Gary looked up from Pepper, who wagged his tail by his side, and he slowly rose before the shimmering image of a house that was coming to.

His bangs fluttering up over eyes that were sober and sad, hand holding a checkered cloth bag that now contained nothing, the General gave a stiff salute.

Behind him, a woman emerged from the front door of the house that took hold in this unraveled world behind the world. Long dark hair tied with a ribbon that dangled down the back of her dress, she took the arm of a man whose shape wavered in and out. Hair in a flat-top, face shaven, eyes not dazed but wistful, small bow-tie hooked to his collared shirt that was tucked in, he wavered out less by the moment.

"He's trying to save his daddy," a little girl whispered a world away where a grown man cried silently as he headed for the police.

(Oh, Gary...)

The window to this other place pulled away from Ed and Barbara and their son Gary, a General who broke face and gave a smile that was warm and knowing, a friend who would see him again, a boy who would never grow up, a soul of divine magic that would never die.

Not in Joe Rendell's heart.

Not at all.

3

From the distance rose the roar of the tornado, the growl of the great destroyer that fast approached. Chad could hear it from inside 32 Saybrook. His sledgehammer still aglow, he raced out of the bathroom and through the house, looking for Joe and Kirsten, screaming their names. He slipped on the slimy remains of gibgoblins on the kitchen floor, crashed, slid into the legs of a jasmangler.

It looked down, lifting its face as Chad rose.

"Colonel Joey and his companion have been taken to safety," the soldier said in a voice that wavered between that of a boy and a man. *"You must clear the area, sir."* It hurried out, its heavy footfalls trailing to the front door. Gone.

Feeling the rising tremble of the house, Chad ran into the living room to haul ass out the front door. A face in the back window snagged his gaze, made him halt, and grit his teeth.

"You..."

Illuminated by the green light from the hammer, the black eyes of the gibgoblin king narrowed before it tore off. Chad bolted out the open back door into the yard where he spotted it scrambling through the branches of the downed tree, and saw no jasmanglers.

Where did they all go!

Snarling, he ran. He veered, leaped through an opening in the branches, stormed around the house where he caught a flash of the gibgoblin as it darted around the corner of the other house.

Running out onto the Morgan lawn, where there was no gibgoblin king and no jasmanglers, Chad looked around sharply.

I lost him. I can't believe I lost him. Goddamn you, jasmanglers. You forgot to take out the boss!

He saw an ambulance peal out with the back doors slamming shut, cruisers parked on the shoulder of Saybrook, cops abandoning them or behind the wheel and fleeing, Joe and Kirsten in the back seat of a patrol car that fled too, Paul Kemp screaming at everybody else and throwing his arms wildly, and Chad saw Castillo at the foot of the cul-de-sac.

Stiff, out of it, and about to die if he didn't stop standing there like someone had ripped his brain out, Castillo didn't seem to see Chad as he ran over to him.

"Deputy, get out of here!" Chad hollered, aware that he had to scream over the roar of the approaching...

He heard the bangs and splintering snaps and pops of huge trees ripped apart.

"Deputy!" Chad shot a glance behind him, snapped it back, and gazed over his shoulder with huge eyes.

Through the woods raged the tornado, a demigod of destruction so close now that he could no longer see it, a rushing wall of annihilation and flying debris that whipped around with an ungodly buzzing sound that could have come from a biblical scale swarm of angry hornets.

"Come o-o-o-n!" Paul Kemp pulled Castillo back and screamed. *"Chad! Get..."*

The rest of the words were lost in the deafening jet-engine roar of the tornado that rushed the clearing.

Chad motioned to run and a terrible voice spoke to him, a goading voice that came more through his head than through his ears: *"I warned you, Chaaaaaaad!"*

Not knowing how he knew where to look, Chad snapped his gaze to the face of the gibgoblin king in the window of the Morgan house.

(Warned me, warned me, what does he mean--)

Suddenly knowing, Chad did not run with Paul and Castillo across the street with the other cops. Chad ran for the

Morgan house instead. In leaping bounds, he ran across the yard.

He did not look back, did not look to his right toward 32 Saybrook that twisted on its foundation and exploded into the tornado.

Noise shook the world, shook every bone in his body as he leaped through the front door and ran for the painting, *hoping* it wasn't already destroyed, *hoping* it was still a window into the Grim where the gibgoblin king must have gone.

The air pulled, gusted, raged, and he *dove* for the black rectangle on the jerking floor, as the house thrashed with machine-gun pops of splitting beams, explosions of flying glass and splinters.

The house--

4

Paul Kemp didn't hear the house *go* over the dull but head-splitting roar of the force that picked it up, but caught glimpses of big sections of it up over the trees before they blew apart into debris that whipped into the blur of the funnel. He couldn't hear himself or anyone else screaming, where they were flat across the street in a ditch that he wished was much deeper and the monster was sure to visit in seconds, given its heading.

He thought of his wife, his girls, his dog.

He thought of his life in wildly spinning film reels.

Seconds passed, the roar remained and he dared a glance up, where he saw a sedan tumbling end-over-end in the high air, over the tree-tops, gone.

Debris missiled through the air, shooting out from the blearing wall of it. The tornado had stopped on the Morgan property. It slowed, lost its grip on much of what it held and sent it hailing down. It rose, spinning slower, unraveling.

Its roar faded into a low tapering growl.

Paul would later swear that he had heard an oldies song wafting lazily in the air as the funnel spun itself back up in the clouds.

Up to the sky that the storm had left full of stars.

E P I L O G U E

SUTTON VALLEY, NEW YORK

The cycles of young Buck Hyman ended forever the night of the great storm, a night of fates and strange happenings from which legends would be born and new stories to scare children would be forged. The dark nature of these tales would be rivaled only by their nobleness. For fiction is inherently kind, a pleasant disguise for the truth, which is often not only stranger but worlds more terrible. Many shapes of monster walk the earth, often close to home, bringing dangers from more directions than one could hope to guard against. Horrible though they might be, they do not possess the power of the demons held in human hearts. Bolstered by minds that dwell on them, crowned by succumbing to them, given shape and high office by a foible of human nature to repress or personify the unpleasant rather than own it, they are a force that govern lives like no other.

The first are born in childhood and of simple nature, often sprouting from the roots of instinctual fear, from dark corners of bedrooms and under beds where imagined monsters lie in wait and exist only to torment *one* child. *They* have presence in their mind. *They* have power.

For years Buck feared a monster in his closet, a presence justified by the fear he felt, the fear justified by its presence, which he believed in so completely that for two years he would not fall asleep in his room alone, or stay in his room if he woke in the dead of night with only the company of what stared from the dark closet. That had changed since his daddy drove it back to Monster Land on a nightly basis, because Buck

believed he could, just as he believed it always returned.

Buck had never seen it, but had imagined it hundreds of times with all the usual features of bogeymen.

Nothing would have prepared Buck for what would come out of his closet in the small hours of that night.

From beneath the door a cold draft hissed out, stirred the paper lanterns on the floor, fluttered the end of scotch tape on a roll that lay between scissors and a glue bottle, lifted the corners of the papers where Buck and Trish had crayoned drawings. Those papers held down by the stapler rustled, while the others were pushed. They slid. They flipped at the foot of Buck's bed.

This was the only warning.

Toys rattled and spilled in the closet before a giggling abomination burst in through the door. It ran, leaped onto the bed, ripped at everything it found there with its claws.

"Buuuuuuck!" a hoarse voice wailed.

Chad Hyman stormed out of the closet in a flurry of toys, charged at the bed where the gibgoblin king had shredded pillows and blankets--

"No! N-o-o!"

--but not his son, who had woken terrified at the crashes of thunder and flashes of lightning and was with his mother across the hall.

The gibgoblin screeched, lunged for the door to the hall, flung itself back when Chad hurled the hammer, which boomed against the doorframe and split the molding.

"Bastard!" Chad leaped to cut it off, whirled when it sprang the other way, and chased it into the closet.

A door opened across the hall. "Chad?"

Squealing, scrabbling at walls, the gibgoblin had no Grim to go back to. Chad grappled it in the dark, beat it while it struggled, cried out when it slashed the side of his face. The

gibgoblin slipped from his grasp and ran back into the bedroom, where Chad leaped and crashed down on it. He wrestled and pounded it on the floor.

The door to the hall opened.

"Cha..." Trish started as she barged in.

She screamed, hands thrown wildly in front of her gaping grin of terror, unable to do anything but scream her lungs out.

Buck stood in the doorway, wide-eyed.

Swearing up a storm while the gibgoblin king screeched, Chad pounded it till he was nearly out of strength. His eyes caught the gleam of the house scissors lying on the floor and he seized them, and he stabbed. He stabbed the gibgoblin king until its squealing ceased.

He stabbed it until it was dead.

Frozen by the door, Trish's screams turned into shrill moans as the flesh of the gibgoblin melted into a puddle that took on a green glow, a glow that clung to the scissors in Chad's hand.

Then, everywhere it was, the glow winked out.

On his knees, leaning on one arm, Chad looked up to Trish and judged that she would soon pass out cold.

The bones and goo left from the gibgoblin blackened with a crackling sound and collapsed into dust.

"You did it," Buck said in a near whisper.

Chad pulled one leg up.

Planted a boot on the floor.

Pushed.

Slowly, he came to his feet, his shadow rising on the wall where super-hero posters hung, the blades of the scissors in his hand gleaming as they caught the light from the hall, his eyes gaining warmth.

He let the scissors fall and held out his hands.

The hard hands of a working man.

A smile dawned behind them. "It's okay, buddy."

"You got him!" Buck cried, as his father hoisted him up into his brawny arms. *"You really got him."*
And Chad held him tight.

Author's Note

The Tommyknocker rhyme that snakes through the story threads of Betty Morgan differs from the version with which most are familiar: the one created by Stephen King, based on a traditional rhyme. The content of the Hoad's Grim rhyme--describing a bogeyman figure that takes bad children away--comes from the version that I heard as a boy from an old woman. That was in '82 or '83. Whether this rhyme was genuinely a traditional rhyme or *tailored* for yours truly (a *perfect* angel who never *ever* got into trouble, I assure you, *never*) is not known, but the function of that rhyme stuck with me. I could not remember the exact wording so many years later, but the rhythm of King's version sounded right and I concede that the rhyme I used in the end owes him a debt of citation.

So there it is. Hat-tip.

As for the rest of the book, I don't have anything important to communicate that the book did not. To say that HOAD'S GRIM was written during a volatile time of my life may erroneously infer that this is an unusual environment in my existence, which, as my nature prescribes, it is not. It was, however, more volatile than most and the beginning of a darkness which has not lifted to this day. In my mind, this book stands out from the novels that came before and those which were born after. This may be due to its intricate layers and idiosyncrasies, but more than that, it has to do with its meaning to me. It has to do with those monsters which roam at the bottom of all its rabbit holes.

It would be a disservice to you, kind reader, to describe those monsters. It would also be irrelevant. What a novel means to me only matters during the process of creation. After that, the only thing that matters is what it means to you.

Whatever that may be, for better or worse, is what it is.
How *you* relate with the material is paramount.
It's your book.
Your grim.

--Jack Kincaid,
August 29, 2009

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

VISIT THE
HOAD'S GRIM
WEBSITE AT:

<http://www.jack-kincaid.com/hoadsgrim>

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