

P
i
E
C
e
S
O
f
H
A
T
E

Nine stories of terror by the master of horror

Ray Garton

Pieces of Hate

Ray Garton

AN [*e-reads*]BOOK

New York, NY

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, scanning or any information storage retrieval system, without explicit permission in writing from the Author.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locals or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

**Copyright © 1996 by Ray Garton
First e-reads publication 2002
www.e-reads.com
ISBN 0-7592-4402-2**

For Harlan Ellison
With admiration and gratitude

Story Credits: "Bait" and "Pieces" originally appeared in Cemetery Dance. "Choices" originally appeared in Midnight Graffiti. Stories original to this volume include: "A Gift From Above," "Cat Hater," "Bad Blood," "Ophelia Raphaeldo," "The Devil's Music," and "God's Work."

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	vi
A Gift From Above	1
Choices	100
Pieces	120
Cat Hater	124
Bad Blood	148
Ophilia Raphaeldo	157
The Devil's Music	170
Bait	181
God's Work	191

Acknowledgements

My thanks to those who helped out in the writing of these stories, many of whom are always ready to give some constructive criticism, answer bizarre questions at odd hours of the night, and who never fail to be supportive on those days when I start thinking I should have been a plumber.

Scott Sandin, Derek Sandin, Francis Feighan, Paul Meredith, Stephanie Terrazas, Vlad and Lynda, Dr. Even K. Reasor, Syd Ayers, Jane Naccarato, my agent Ricia Mainhardt, Harlan Ellison, Andrew Vachss, Cheri Scotch, Sheila Winston, Randy Adams, my parents Ray and Pat Garton, and my wife Dawn . . . and, of course, our cats Murphy and Bob, who, in their own way, help put things in perspective for me, and who, with their teeth and claws, keep me humble.

One

A Gift From Above

**FOR DEREK SANDIN, A GREAT FRIEND, AND A
BOTTOMLESS WELL OF INVALUABLE INFORMATION**

1

Margaret Fuller had forgotten how clear the Arizona night sky could be. Against a backdrop of purple-black velvet, stars shimmered brilliantly, as if God had spilled great handfuls of tiny diamonds across the sky.

Her new Lexus hummed smoothly along the Interstate, which appeared to be virtually deserted. Margaret hadn't seen another east-bound car since she'd crossed the border, and only a scant few heading west.

She preferred driving to any other mode of transportation, and when she drove she preferred to drive at night, so she'd left Los Angeles late in the day. She found it soothing to drive at night, when the traffic was thin and the air was cool and clear, so clear that she could pick up the staticky ghosts of radio stations in Idaho and Colorado. Best of all, it was just Margaret and the road, with no one to tell her what to do, how to drive, or to comment on how she looked; it seemed like three times a week or so at work that somebody said to her: "Were you up late last night," or "Are you feeling well, Margaret? You look tired." But in the car, on the road, there was no one to say anything at all, and she loved that, savored it.

Margaret had been in Arizona a little under an hour and Los Angeles was well behind her, and that made her feel a little more relaxed than usual. But at the same time, without her work to think

and worry about, she had plenty of empty time to think about what she was getting herself into.

That's why the radio was turned up so loud. A smoke-voiced female talk-show host was talking to a woman from Boulder City, Nevada, who was complaining about the fact that, although they were both in their thirties, she and her sister still had the same petty competitive relationship they'd had since they were kids.

Margaret laughed quietly as she shook a cigarette from its pack with one hand, put it between her lips and lit it.

"You're only in your thirties, honey," she muttered as the conversation on the radio continued. She shook her head slowly, smiling. "Let's see if it lasts as long for you as it has for me."

Margaret's sister Lynda — now Lynda Donnelly, although she was divorced from what Margaret had heard — was dying of cancer. Stomach cancer. But it had spread. A lot. Like peanut butter, from what she'd heard.

They had been out of touch for years, which had been just fine with Margaret. But then Aunt Bedelia had called one day and told her about Lynda's condition. She'd talked for a long time without ever giving Margaret a chance to respond. In fact, as Margaret saw it, Aunt Bedelia had chewed her a new asshole. Aunt Bedelia was confined to a wheelchair and lived in North Platte, Nebraska, so she wasn't up to traveling, but she didn't hesitate to remind Margaret that *she* could travel, that *she* could go to Harlie without any problem, what with her having money and all. She'd said that Lynda's ex-husband had remarried and was having nothing to do with her now in her time of trouble. And she'd said if Margaret really believed that whatever animosity had existed between herself and Lynda for so long was more important than the fact that her own sister was *dying all alone*. . . well, then, Margaret would just have to live with that weighing on her conscience for the rest of her natural life.

That was why she was returning to her hometown of Harlie, Arizona. It wasn't just because of Aunt Bedelia's usual pushiness and her exquisite ability to make anyone at any time — even a total stranger — feel as guilty as the Roman soldier who drove the nails through Jesus Christ. She'd had no idea Lynda was dying. Now that she knew, she felt a little differently about things. Something inside her really *wanted* to see Lynda, and, if possible, to smooth over the bit-

terness Margaret had felt toward her ever since they were little girls. That was not going to be easy . . . but it was a hell of a lot harder to compromise with death than it was to hold a grudge.

The bitterness had been growing for as long as Margaret could remember. It probably started as soon as Margaret and Lynda — who was three years older than she — were just old enough for everyone to see that Lynda was the petite and pretty one, with those big brown eyes and that full, wavy dark hair, and that Margaret was the clumsy, gangly, homely one, with flat, washed out hair and eyes that not only did not stand out but seemed to try to hide from any exposure. From that moment on, their parents treated them accordingly, and seemed to expect Margaret and Lynda to treat one another accordingly; in other words, Margaret was expected to defer to Lynda, and Lynda was expected to be deferred to by Margaret. Then, as they got older, Margaret got fat. Suddenly, she wasn't only the homely one, she was the *fat* one, and Lynda simply grew more and more beautiful with each passing year.

Sometimes, when Margaret got so fed up with being reminded by her sister that she was fat, she would snap. Unable to articulate her pain and anger and loneliness, she would simply let out a long, shrill scream, as if she were being attacked or beaten. Later, when she was calm, Lynda would lead her to the full-length mirror, where she would stand behind Margaret, and she would say. "I only said you were fat. Now look at yourself, Margaret. Just look at yourself. Am I wrong? Was I lying? No. I wasn't lying. You *are* fat. All I'm saying is that if you don't want people to call you fat, then you should lose weight. Go on a diet, start exercising or *something*. But remember . . . I didn't say anything that wasn't true."

No, she had not, and knowing that fact made Margaret's days miserable. But it wasn't until they reached high school that she realized her troubles were only beginning.

In high school, Margaret had managed to snag only one boyfriend. His name was Albert Huffman and he wasn't really good-looking, but he wasn't a nerd, either. He was — at first, anyway — sweet, and he treated Margaret like a queen. He was smart and funny and he had such big, beautiful eyes. They weren't together very long, though. Just long enough for them to make out a few times, for him to slide his hand under her shirt and clumsily grope her disproportionately small

but fleshy breasts and tweak her nipples as he gnawed on her neck and earlobes. It had been rather nice, actually . . . a pleasant memory from her youth, the only one of its kind. And maybe it would have happened a few more times and even gone further . . . if Albert hadn't developed a crush on Lynda. He pursued her. And he got her. Like so many other guys. After all, she was the head cheerleader, the teachers loved her, and she was the object of more lust than could be found in the collected works of Harold Robbins.

When Margaret had confronted her sister about Albert Huffman, Lynda had said, "I'm sorry you feel that way, Maggie, but if you'll just look at it realistically, you'll see what *really* happened. I didn't *steal* him from you. He *came* to me. He *preferred* me, okay? After all, we only went on a few dates. It's not like we were some hot item. So get over it, Maggie. Besides . . . he wasn't such a great catch, you know. He was a lousy lay. You're better off starting out with somebody else."

High school had been a nightmare for Margaret, but it was the *other* reason she was going to Harlie: her twenty-fifth high school reunion. She was still debating whether or not to attend, because she knew who would be there: every man who had ever laughed at her in the cafeteria or ignored her at a dance, and every woman who had ever snubbed her in those girl-talking klatches in the locker room or laughed at her clumsiness on the field during P.E. And, of course, Albert Huffman. They would all be there, she was certain; they would be smiling and laughing as they drank punch and ate olives and carrot sticks and cocktail franks and they would probably all remind her that back then, in high school, she'd been fat, a real dog, a wallflower at dances and a clod in the gym.

There was, of course, one consolation. She was no longer fat.

There had come a time when Margaret became sick of dieting and sick of being plain. Once she'd made quite a success of herself in the advertising business, she could afford to give her entire body, from face to feet, a complete workover. And she did. Plastic surgery, liposuction, tucks here and there; her lips were injected with collagen, her eyes were improved, her chin and cheekbones were enhanced and her breasts were enlarged. She stopped dieting and bingeing and purging and instead started to exercise until she became addicted to it, like some insidious drug; she even started sunbathing for the

first time in her life, and got quite a tan, which she worked hard to keep. As a result, she was able to maintain the body she never thought she'd have to go along with the face and tits that had been so expensive.

Of course . . . that had been some years ago. Cosmetic surgery doesn't last forever, especially if it's facial. She'd been warned of that by her doctor and had gone in for a few touch-ups — especially for her lips, which had to be injected with more collagen about every six or seven months — but she'd gotten tired of the pain and swelling and bandages after repairs on this facial feature and that body part. The time between touch-ups began to grow longer and longer, until she didn't go in at all, abandoning the idea of manufactured good looks in favor of continuing her exercises and healthy eating, and just trying to feel good about herself without any help.

Over time, however, all the work her surgeon had performed began to fade from her face and body like an old memory. Her face developed deep wrinkles that were much too visible for her age, like cuts that had been made in her skin with a dull razor. Bags of puffy flesh the color of old cigarette ashes developed beneath her eyes, and her lips began to look rather . . . deflated.

And now, at the age of 42, it took nothing more than a fleeting glimpse into a mirror to make her realize that her brief period of beauty was over, gone, just like her youth. Those wrinkles on her face had grown deeper and had begun to sag, along with everything else that had been worked on. She'd realized years ago that age was treating her much more harshly than it would have had she not gone through all that cosmetic surgery.

But at least I'm still thin, she thought every time she saw her reflection. And she was still thin, which was the only reason she was thinking about attending that high school reunion. They would all be losing their hair and thickening around the middle (if they weren't complete tubs already), and they would remember Margaret as being fat; she, on the other hand, would be thin. She liked the thought of that. There was a certain justice to it. She would, of course, have to control her anger and bitterness toward them — it had never faded over the years, not even a little bit — but she figured the worse they looked, the easier that would be. Looking at their neglected bodies of stretched,

cottage cheese flesh, while hers was slender, firm and still rather shapely, would be punishment enough for them.

Margaret punched her cigarette into the ashtray, then, tired of hearing about the problems of the caller in Boulder City, Nevada, she began to wander up and down the AM dial in search of another talk show that was more interesting and less provocative. When she found nothing, she slipped a CD into the player and listened to some jazz as her tires hummed over the surface of the Interstate, taking her toward the dark and sparkling sky that met with the desert floor far off in the distance . . .

Margaret gasped as her eyes snapped open, her back stiffened and her hands clutched the steering wheel tightly. Her heart trip-hammered in her chest as she stared wide-eyed through the windshield at the road ahead.

The quiet jazz on the stereo and the lulling hum of the tires beneath her had relaxed her so much that she'd begun to doze off at the wheel. Her knuckles turned white as she slowed the car a bit, her breasts heaving with each rapid breath.

"Sheez," she muttered, "wake the hell *up!*"

She hadn't even realized she was tired, but she wasn't going to give herself the opportunity to fall asleep again. Margaret took a cigarette from the pack and lit it, then stopped the music and began searching the AM dial again for voices. She figured she would be much less likely to fall asleep to the sound of loud voices than she would to the sound of music.

There was a man rambling on and on about what a disgrace it was to have a president who had dodged the draft and had never served in the military, and a preacher raved about the horrors of abortion and homosexuality; she found a station that was all news all the time, and another that was all sports all the time.

She was still searching the dial when she saw the light up ahead.

When she first spotted it, it was high in the night sky, steadily making its way downward. She eased up on the accelerator as she ducked her head a bit to watch it through the windshield, frowning as her eyes followed its descent.

The light was white in the middle and very bright, but around the edges it became an electric blue. As Margaret looked at the glowing

object carefully, she smirked when she realized it was shaped like one of the Xanax pills she sometimes took when she was feeling especially anxious. But her smirk fell away immediately when she realized something else.

She was seeing a UFO!

Her eyes widened beneath eyebrows lowered in a deep frown as she slowed the car even more. Her heart began to pound hard when it became obvious that the glowing object was getting bigger and bigger as it descended . . . and Margaret soon realized it was going to lower itself onto the interstate directly in front of her.

It grew larger rapidly, making her wonder, with a chill, exactly how big it really *was*. Margaret was so stunned by the sight of the object and so busy watching the thing that it never occurred to her to step on the brake.

Before she knew it — as if it had happened in the blink of an eye — the glowing object filled her entire windshield and she suddenly threw herself back in the seat with a little cry and, out of panic and fear, slammed her foot down on the brake pedal as hard she could.

The tires screamed as they slid over the pavement at an angle, and when Margaret realized she had lost control of the car, she began to fight with the steering wheel. It did no good, and she screamed as the car shot into the ditch beside the freeway, just a few yards from the glowing object that had come from the sky, which was now a monolith that towered over the car, so bright that she held a hand up before her eyes.

“Oh, God,” she muttered, “my God, my God.”

She was frozen, her whole body — her arms, legs, not even her lips — nothing would move. The only thing she could do was stare out at the enormous structure that was blocking the eastbound side of the Interstate and a good portion of the desert to her right. A cold wriggling worked its way down her spinal column, from neck to ass, and she couldn’t stop her frantic, staccato breathing.

It was like nothing she’d ever seen before . . . except in the movies. It was so big and had such a glow coming from it — a natural glow, not from lights, but a glow that seemed to come organically from the smooth, curved walls of the object — that she began to feel as if her mind had been injected with Novocain and was quickly becoming so

numb that she couldn't think, couldn't even form a single word in her mind, not so much as a fuzzy concept.

As Margaret stared in awe at the object, a round section in the bottom half opened smoothly like a camera lens. She sucked in a sharp breath as she watched it, seeing nothing but blackness beyond the opening. Until she saw movement . . . the slight movement of shadowy figures in that blackness.

This time, she held her breath, unable to inhale or exhale as movement continued in that dark circle.

Then those shadowy figures came out of the black hole. Three of them. They floated gracefully down, feet first, as if they were being lowered on cables . . . but they weren't.

Their bodies were incredibly slender and very pale. Their heads were large and their eyes were even darker than the hole from which they had emerged. They had no noses and no mouths that she could see. Their stick-like arms seemed far too long for their bodies, and their large hands had long, bony fingers that moved restlessly at their sides as they approached her car.

Suddenly, all feeling and movement came back to Margaret as she watched them float down toward the pavement of Interstate 10 and she felt a bit panicky.

Their large, almond-shaped eyes remained black, but glistened with moisture as they looked directly into Margaret's eyes through the windshield, coming closer, in no hurry but moving with purpose, with determination.

"Shit!" she cried, throwing the car into reverse. "Oh God please help me, my God, *please God!*"

She tried to get the car out of the ditch, but she found it hard to take her eyes off the creatures approaching her. They were three or four feet from the car when her door snapped open by itself. She slammed her foot down on the accelerator . . .

. . . but the engine died.

Margaret felt sick with fear, so sick that she was unable to scream as they got closer and began to reach out their long, skinny arms.

When the first one wrapped his long fingers around her left arm, she let out a loud, high scream that echoed through the empty night, but it did no good.

The creature pulled her out of the car with surprising strength, then placed his other hand atop her head.

In seconds, the desert disappeared and her mind was filled with the utter blackness of the sky above it . . .

2

Thump — thump — thump . . . thump — thump — thump . . .

The sound came again and again, reaching her slowly through the deep, muddy waters of sleep. It seemed so muffled that, as she began to wake, Margaret was certain it was coming from some distance.

Before she even opened her eyes, she began to feel the stiffness in her body — in her back and shoulders and neck — and she realized she was sitting up, not lying in bed where she knew she *should* be if she were waking up. She winced as she leaned forward rigidly and opened her eyes.

“Ma’am?”

The voice made her jump and she jerked her head to the left, her eyes widening at the sight of a highway patrolman leaning down to peer at her through the window. He had hair the color of beach sand and skin darkened by the sun, in his late twenties, maybe early thirties.

She stared at him, shocked and mute.

“Would you mind rolling down the window, ma’am?” he asked, voice raised to be heard through the glass.

She stammered as she hit the button a couple times, then realized the ignition had to be on. She turned the key, pressed the button, and the window hummed down.

“H-have I d-done something wrong. Off-Officer?” she asked, her voice hoarse.

“I don’t really know, ma’am. I saw you on the shoulder here, your car in the ditch, I just wanted to make sure you were okay. *Are you okay?*”

“Well, yes, I was . . . I-I was just sleeping.” It wasn’t until that moment that she realized it was just past dawn. “I was driving all night, see, and I . . .” She turned to look ahead on the interstate before continuing, suddenly feeling herself being clutched in the cold,

razor-like talon of panic. It was gone. That colossal thing that had landed there in the dark of night was gone now, and from what she could see, there was absolutely no sign that it had ever been there. Forcing herself to calm down, she glanced at the officer as she continued, “. . . and I, um . . . well, I . . .” She glanced back at that place where the thing had been, just to make sure. What could she tell the highway patrolman when *she* wasn't even sure what had happened? Had she dreamed the whole thing? Had she gotten so tired she'd pulled over to — yes, that was it. It would have to do for now.

“I got very tired,” she said, looking at him again. “There didn't seem to be any rest stops or motels or restaurants ahead and I figured there wouldn't be for miles, maybe hours . . . so I pulled over to take a nap. I guess I slept longer than intended.”

He nodded. “Have you been drinking?”

She flinched, offended by the suggestion. “No, of *course* I haven't been drinking, I've been *sleeping*. I'm on my way from Los Angeles to Harlie to see my sister because she's dy . . . she's, um, sick. In the hospital. Very sick.”

He nodded again. “Sorry, ma' am. I was just asking. That's part of my job. You did the right thing, you know. Pulling over like that. You might've saved yourself and somebody else by doing that. But in the future, try to plan ahead so that won't happen again. It's a good idea to make sure you're plenty rested up before you start on a long trip.”

She just nodded, not knowing what to say.

The patrolman stood. “You have a safe trip, now. And hope your sister gets better.”

He nodded with a rather tight smile, then walked away. She looked in her rearview mirror and saw him getting into his white patrol car, watched as he pulled the door closed with a muffled clump, and waited for him to start his engine. But he didn't.

Margaret sucked in a deep breath and let it out sharply as she rubbed her eyes with the heels of her palms, then scrubbed her palms over her face vigorously. She lit a cigarette, took a deep drag as she started the Lexus, then backed out of the ditch. This time, it was easy . . . but she remembered it being impossible last night . . . if, indeed, that had happened at all.

Once she'd backed up, she heard the patrol car start. He pulled around the Lexus, waving as he got back on the interstate and drove away.

Margaret stared at the large section of ground that had — unless she'd dreamed it — been occupied by some gigantic, glowing craft the night before. She could still almost see it . . . a ghost-like memory of it, filling her windshield, swallowing her view of the desert.

She closed her eyes and leaned her forehead on the steering wheel, muttering. "What happened to me?"

After awhile, she took a deep breath, put the car in gear and pulled back onto the interstate . . .

3

Harlie was a small town about eighty miles east of Tucson. The biggest hotel in town was the Royal House, which was where the reunion was being held. She decided she wouldn't be caught dead staying in the same hotel as some of her former classmates from out of town. As she drove around, she saw a Motel 6, the Cactus Flower Motor Inn, a ratty little joint called simply Desert Cottages, and a couple of bed and breakfast establishments that were probably overpriced. She finally settled on a Best Western Inn on the very edge of Harlie, near the freeway. It wasn't exactly what she'd grown accustomed to on her frequent business trips as a successful woman in the high-pressure advertising biz, but it was a far cry from having to go outside in the middle of the night if she wanted ice.

The second her things were scattered over her bed, Margaret shed her clothes and took a long hot shower.

She took her time under the spray of water. Her body was stiff from sleeping all night in her car and she'd developed an industrial-strength headache during the remainder of her drive to Harlie. She'd spent that whole drive going over and over her memories of the night before. She assumed that was where the headache had come from.

She'd asked herself question after question, more often than not talking aloud to herself. Had she dreamed it? If so, why didn't she remember getting tired and pulling into the ditch to take a nap? She *knew* she hadn't done that — it had simply been a convincing lie for the benefit of the patrolman — so it was unlikely she would remember doing something she hadn't done. She didn't even remember *going* to sleep; one second, she'd been trying to get away from those creatures reaching for her in the car, and the next, she was waking up just

after dawn to a cop peering into her window. So, if she hadn't gone to sleep and dreamed it, what the hell had happened?

There was, of course, one glaringly obvious explanation, but she tried to resist even considering it. She had visions of sharing that particular explanation with someone in confidence, then going to the grocery store a few days later to see herself on the cover of the *Weekly World News* beneath the headline: **ADVERTISING EXECUTIVE ATTACKED BY U.F.O. ALIENS! — Probed Rectally Then Impregnated By Elvis!**

But could she honestly attribute it to anything else?

She'd heard several stories of so-called U.F.O. abductees. They seldom remembered what had happened to them at first. It usually came back to them later, either spontaneously or with the help of hypnosis.

But what else could possibly explain that huge flying thing? Or the creatures that had floated out of it and come for her?

Even there, under the hot, steaming shower, Margaret shuddered at the memory of those eyes, those faces without noses or mouths or ears, those long arms and oversized, bony-fingered hands.

She lifted her face to the water and scrubbed it, as if to wash the memory away.

But was it *really* a memory?

If that was indeed what had happened to her, Margaret decided she would tell no one. If that was the case, she never wanted to remember what had happened to her during those hours of what had seemed like sleep, and she vowed to herself, there in the shower, that she would never do anything that might allow any deeply hidden memories to rise to the surface of her consciousness like some long lost, bloated corpse . . .

4

Having followed the directions given her by the old woman at the information desk, Margaret arrived at 4-East — the east wing of the fourth floor of the Sisters of Mercy Hospital — and froze. She stared with dread at the door of room 406 — Lynda's room — as she walked toward it slowly. She stayed on the opposite side of the corridor, close to the wall, and her hands trembled with nervousness. She stood across the corridor from the door for a long time, holding her clutch purse tightly in both hands in front of her.

As she stared at that door, images of childhood flashed through Margaret's mind, bitter and hurtful images that had been burned deep into her memory permanently. She knew that once she stepped through that door, she would be facing a sick and dying woman, and she would have to let go of that bitterness. She found the fact that it had not yet left her rather disturbing, and she was suddenly not quite sure that she could pull it off. But it was too late now.

"May I help you?"

Margaret started and turned to the young nun who was smiling at her with sparkling eyes slightly magnified by thick round glasses. The corridors of Sisters of Mercy Hospital were crawling with nuns like her, the new, modernized variety with white cowls on their heads, light blue smocks and skirts, and white stockings with sensible white nurse's shoes.

"I'm sorry?" Margaret blurted, momentarily confused.

"You look lost. Can I help you find someone?"

"Oh, no. I've found her. Thank you."

"Certainly." Still smiling, the nun turned and walked away.

Turning to the door of Lynda's room again, Margaret took a deep breath, digging her fingernails into her purse. She lifted her head, put a smile on her face, crossed the hall, pushed the door open and walked into the room.

She stopped just inside the room as the door swung closed slowly behind her. She'd expected some horrible smell, the odor of death and decay. Instead, she was met with the clean smell of talcum powder and soap. Maybe things weren't quite as bad as she'd expected.

To Margaret's right was a curtain wrapped around a bed. She knew that was not Lynda's, though, and stepped forward. Lynda's bed was on the other side of the room by the window. The curtain had been drawn to the foot of the bed and the television mounted high on the wall opposite the bed was playing, but with the volume all the way down.

Margaret stepped around the edge of the curtain silently and stood at the foot of the bed.

Lynda was lying on her side, fast asleep, making occasional quiet snoring sounds. At least . . . Margaret assumed it was Lynda. There was a large bandana wrapped around the top and back of the sleeping head on the pillow. Margaret could only see the left side of the face,

but it looked so old and gaunt. The ridge of bone beneath the forehead seemed to stick out way too much, and the temple sunk inward as if it had collapsed. The cheek was hollow beneath a prominent cheekbone that appeared so sharp it seemed about to cut through the paper-thin flesh, which was a sickly yellowish-gray. The neck was impossibly thin, so thin that it might break beneath the weight of the head if the pillow were not there. An I.V. pole stood on the right side of the bed and a tube ran from the plastic bag of clear liquid to the inside of Lynda's right elbow.

Margaret lifted a hand very slowly and touched her fingertips to her lips as her eyes became slits and the corners of her mouth turned downward, wrinkling the edges of her suddenly tight lips.

She turned away from the bed and placed her purse on the counter beside the sink. A sob was rolling upward from deep in her chest, but she fought it back. The last thing she wanted, after being apart all these years, was for Lynda to wake up and see her crying.

But Margaret was surprised to find that her reason was not a selfish one. It wasn't because she was afraid Lynda would perceive her as soft after all these years of bitter silence, or even that she was afraid to show Lynda that she cared. No, it was that face lying on the pillow. If Lynda had gotten as sick as she looked, she didn't need someone else crying. She needed smiles and casual conversation and quiet support.

Margaret had wondered if she would be able to swallow the bitterness she'd felt toward her sister for so long. Her question had been answered quite suddenly and unexpectedly, and she wasn't even fully aware of it quite yet. All she knew at the moment was that she felt no animosity right now. She was aware only of the need for her to make herself available to Lynda for as long as she had left and to do what she could. Suddenly, all thoughts of everything that had happened between them in the years past were gone, as if she'd never had them.

Was it really that easy? Could years of resentment and hurt feelings and bitterness just crumble away after a few seconds in a hospital room?

She leaned both hands on the edge of the counter, elbows locked, and took some slow, deep breaths, then plucked a small paper cup from the plastic tubular dispenser on the wall beside the mirror and drank some water. She was halfway through her second cup when a ragged voice cried out behind her. Margaret dropped the cup into the

sink and spun around, frightened.

Lynda was rolling onto her back and slowly sitting up, her face a mixture of searing pain and abject terror. Sitting up was quite a struggle for her, and Margaret went to her bedside.

"Another nightmare," Lynda croaked, without looking up at her. "God, they're awful. I . . . I dreamed I was . . . having surgery. Only the doctors didn't give me any anesthesia, and they . . . they started pulling my insides out and showing them to me." She lifted her head carefully. "Do you think I could have another one of those shots? I'm really hurting. I don't think I can put up with . . ." She blinked several times and cocked her head. "Hey, you're not a nurse."

Margaret forced herself to smile, even as she looked into that deathmask of a face. "Hello, sis. How's tricks?"

Lynda stared at her for a long, silent moment; her mouth opened slowly, farther and farther, until it looked as if her jaw might simply peel away from her face and plop into her lap. Then she grinned.

That was the worst. It was hard for Margaret to keep that smile. It was like being grinned at by a corpse that had just crawled up out of the grave. But she managed, smiling the whole time.

"M-Maggie?" she rasped, sitting up straighten. "My God, Maggie, is it really you, or . . . or am I still dreaming?"

"Oh, thanks a lot. What, you think I'm going to take your insides out without the benefit of anesthesia?"

"No, no, I didn't mean . . . oh, Maggie, I can't believe you're really . . . that you came all this way to . . ." Finally, Lynda leaned her upper body on her and wrapped her arms around Margaret's waist.

Margaret bent forward and returned the embrace, though she regretted it immediately. The thing in her arms, beneath her hands, was not the body of a living person. It was a skeleton with some kind of thin, clammy, tissue-like material stretched tightly over its bones to hold in the organs. She was starting to feel the pressure of the sob making its way up to her throat again, like a lump of bile, and she started swallowing rapidly to hold it back, still smiling, when she heard Lynda laugh.

She backed away from Margaret and looked up at her, still laughing, and it sounded like pebbles being dropped on a taut piece of paper. "Oh, Maggie, it's so good to see you. I was just thinking of you

yesterday because your high school reunion is coming up this weekend, but I didn't think I'd ever . . . well, I figured we wouldn't . . ."

"Stop thinking and figuring."

Lynda grimaced and doubled over, groaning.

"Is there something I can do?" Margaret asked, trying hard to keep her voice steady. She'd never been around sickness, she'd never witnessed pain, and she did not know how to react to them.

Lynda sat up slowly and reached for the call-button clamped to the upper corner of her mattress. She pushed the button.

"I just need a shot, that's all," she whispered. "For pain. The nurse'll be here soon. Then . . ." She looked at Margaret with a half-hearted smile. ". . . we'll talk, right? I mean, you'll stay for a while, won't you? Please?"

Margaret took her hand — what there was of it — and grinned down at her sister. "I'll stay for as long as you need me. And we'll talk for as long as you want."

"Oh, I'm so glad. We have so much to talk about. So *much*."

She lay back onto the pillow, her face screwing up with the pain again. But she never let go of Margaret's hand. In fact, she held it as tightly as she could . . . which wasn't very tight at all . . .

5

Margaret sat in a chair at Lynda's bedside thumbing through a month-old issue of *People*. Michael Jackson was sporting his latest bit of plastic surgery, Liz had just returned from her latest hospital visit and Cher had broken up with her latest much-younger man.

And Lynda was lying in her bed, still and peaceful, almost as if she had died. Margaret closed the magazine and watched her sister with an uncomfortable wince-like expression on her face.

Margaret had been in the room for ninety minutes at the most, and this was the third time Lynda had dozed off. They'd hardly been able to talk. It was as if the act of staying awake had become too overwhelming an effort for the fragile creature Lynda had become.

As she watched her sister sleep, Margaret wondered how much longer she had to live. Would she die this week? Next week? Judging from Lynda's appearance, she could die today.

Would she die right in *front* of Margaret?

The reason Margaret had taken a couple weeks off from work was so she could spend time with Lynda, but . . . she didn't know if she was ready to watch her die. She certainly hadn't expected it, hadn't even *thought* of it. So naturally, she had not wondered how she might react to it. She couldn't imagine even now. All she knew was that she had a very odd feeling inside, a feeling that seemed foreign: that this sick, frail woman lying in the bed beside her was her *sister*. All of the anger and resentment and bitterness she'd felt over the years had made no difference; those bad feelings had not melted away, not by any means, but one fact remained: Lynda was still her sister and now she was dying.

Margaret reached over and took her sister's limp left hand in hers. She sat there holding it for a while, staring rather blankly at the silent television set mounted high up on the wall across from the bed, trying not to think about exactly how ugly this trip to Harlie could turn out to be . . .

Margaret jerked awake when the nurse came in. She was middle-aged and thin and smiling with dark shoulder-length hair; she hadn't noticed Margaret yet. The nurse carried a bag made of heavy transparent plastic and filled with a clear liquid. She went straight to the I.V. pole on the other side of the bed from Margaret and hung the bag on the hook opposite the I.V. bag that was already there. She unraveled a narrow tube that came from the bottom of the bag and leaned over Lynda.

Margaret's eyes widened as the nurse opened Lynda's hospital gown and took between her fingers a small tube that was connected to Lynda by an I.V. needle inserted just beneath her right clavicle. The nurse was about to connect both tubes when she noticed Margaret.

"Jesus Mary and Joseph!" she exclaimed in a quiet, breathy voice and with a melodic Irish lilt, so quickly that it all sounded like one word. "I didn't even *see* you there, lass." She chuckled. "I'm Mary." Then she went back to her work, connecting the tubes, checking the other I.V. She walked around the bed to Margaret and said very quietly, "That's her chemo."

"Her what?" Margaret asked in a whisper.

"Chemotherapy. For the cancer."

"But I thought the cancer was incurable."

Mary averted her gaze and ran her tongue quickly over her lips. "I guess you'll have to talk to Dr. Plummer about that, now, won't cha."

Suddenly, she smiled broadly and looked directly into Margaret's eyes. "So, now. You know who I am, but . . . who are you?"

Margaret stood, plopped the magazine down in the chair behind her, and whispered, "I'm Margaret Fuller, her sister."

They shook hands and exchanged pleasantries, then Mary said, "You're the first visitor she's had, far as I know. I think it'll be doin' her a lot of good, too, you want my opinion."

"Tell me something. Is it normal for her to just, um, you know . . . fall asleep so much?"

Mary reached out and patted Margaret's shoulder. "What with all the chemo she's gettin', *plus* the pain medication . . . and not to mention, of course, the, um . . . the cancer . . . well, it's pretty natural for her to drop off now and then. Her body's havin' to deal with a lot and she's pretty drained. Just be patient." She gave that bright smile again, then turned and left the room.

"She's nice, isn't she?"

Margaret spun around to see Lynda trying to sit up in bed, her smile splitting her pale, gaunt face so completely that it looked like the top half of her skull might fall to the floor.

"Would you like me to bring up the head of the bed?" Margaret asked.

"Yeah, sure."

Margaret unclamped the remote from the edge of the mattress beside Lynda's pillow and hit the appropriate button. The head of the bed began to rise with a rattling hum, and Lynda told her when to stop.

"How about a little knee action down there?" Lynda asked, nodding toward the lower end of the bed. "Otherwise, I'm gonna slide down to the foot of the bed like a paraplegic."

Margaret hit another button and the bottom half of the bed curled upward beneath Lynda's knees. "Is that okay?" she asked cautiously.

"Perfect. Just perfect."

For a moment, Margaret wasn't quite sure what to do with herself. She clamped the remote back on the edge of the mattress, and removed the magazine from the chair, tossed it to the floor and planted herself in the chair, screeching its legs over the floor as she turned it to face the bed so she could look at Lynda.

"You okay?" Margaret asked, frowning.

"Come on, will you? Stop looking so serious. We both know I'm not okay, but I'm . . . okay. Okay?"

They both laughed, but Lynda's sounded like a small rodent caught in a wet, clogged drain.

"Actually, come to think of it," Lynda said, "I feel pretty good, all things considered. I'm usually nauseated. I mean all the time. I guess that nap did more good than most. I'm always dozing off like that. I'm really sorry. I mean, for falling asleep."

"Hey, don't worry about it."

"Yeah, but we haven't had a chance to really talk yet, have we?"

"Well, maybe not. But if you need to sleep, that's more important."

"If it means not being able to talk with you . . . well, then it is important." Lynda's smile withered. "I think you know as well as I do that I don't have that much time. And we have a lot to discuss, don't we? I mean . . . well, I guess what I'm saying is that . . . aside from falling asleep every twenty minutes . . . I have a lot to apologize for."

Margaret took in a deep breath as she averted her eyes, then emptied her lungs slowly. She was trying to decide what to say, how to respond. Something in her gut tightened, telling her that hell, *yes*, Lynda *did* have a lot of apologizing to do, and Margaret should just sit back and let her *do* it!

But when she looked at Lynda, Margaret felt differently. She took Lynda's hand again and held it between both of hers as she leaned toward the bed. Very quietly, she said, "What do you say we just let bygones be bygones, and . . . and all those other things people say in situations like this. We're sisters, and in spite of all the time we've been apart, we've always been sisters. Always will be. All I'm concerned about right now is that we try our best to make up for lost time. I guess . . ." Margaret frowned a moment. "I guess if anyone should be apologizing, it should be me. I mean, if I'd listened to myself, I never would have made this trip." She chuckled. "I doubt you're likely to meet anyone who can hold a grudge as long as I can, Lynda."

Lynda's hand tightened its grip on Margaret's. In fact, that grip was surprisingly strong. "I'm sorry," she said. "For everything. Really. You've had every right to hold a grudge. I'm just glad you came. I guess we've both changed over the years. For the better."

"Well . . . all that stuff was a long time ago. Let's drop it, okay? For now, let's concentrate on making you feel better."

Lynda smiled weakly. "I don't think that's going to happen, Margaret. But I know I'm happy to spend what time I've got left with you . . ."

6

By the time she got into her car in the hospital parking lot it was dark and Margaret was exhausted. Her muscles ached as if she'd just put herself through an extended workout, and there was a dull ache behind her eyes. And yet, she carried with her a strange and comforting sense of satisfaction and relief.

Her mood, in fact, was better than it had been upon arriving. In spite of her aches, she felt quite relaxed. She found an oldies station on the radio that was playing something by Herman's Hermits and smiled as she drove through the parking lot toward the exit.

That was when it hit her. It was more of a seizure than a memory because it was so physical, so consuming, as if she were being violently shaken by some monstrous hand.

Her foot stomped on the brake pedal and the car jerked to a halt in the parking lot as she clutched the wheel with both pale-knuckled hands and stared wide-eyed out the windshield . . .

She was surrounded by a green light, sickening green, a green that seemed to soak into her skin and gather in her stomach, nauseating her. Lying on her back, she stared upward through the green haze to a curved metal ceiling. Then the faces appeared above her, all at once. They leaned forward and looked down at her with their huge heads and huge eyes and no mouths. And then, one of them touched her . . .

It stopped, leaving Margaret as she had been, gripping the wheel and staring straight ahead, her foot pressing on the brake, the engine running, the radio playing a song by Harry Nilsson.

A car behind her honked and she flinched, looked in the rearview mirror, and pulled her Lexus out of the way. The man driving the car behind her flipped her off as he passed, but Margaret didn't notice. She was still wide-eyed and slack-jawed, stunned by the runaway train that had just roared through her mind.

It was a fragment of memory, a piece of what had happened to her last night.

"It was real," she whispered to herself. "*Real!*"

Still shaky, Margaret left the parking lot and drove to her hotel . . .

It happened again as she was on her way to bed.

She'd cleaned up, brushed her hair, her teeth, and was walking toward the bed when she was, once again, engulfed by a memory so vivid that she could *feel* it . . .

The creatures lean forward until their faces are only inches from her body, from her face. She tries to scream but has no voice at all, and hardly any breath. The oversized hands touch her lightly, everywhere; the long, thin fingers crawl over her body like the legs of tarantulas, exploring, touching, examining. All the while, she is surrounded by a thick, unsettling silence. She watches as the creatures exchange glances and nod occasionally, as if they are speaking to one another. Then, very slowly, all those heads turn toward her and look directly into her eyes . . .

When it was gone — No, Margaret, thought, *it's not gone, not gone at all, it just stopped for now!* — she was curled up on the pillows, her back pressed hard against the headboard of the bed, both hands clamped over her mouth. Her eyes were gaping and darting in all directions, searching the room to make sure she was alone.

She relaxed very slowly, a bit at a time, until she was lying on the bed, taking deep breaths.

"It was . . . real," she whispered to herself, her eyes still wide. "*Real. I didn't dream it. It . . . really . . . happened.*"

Margaret stared up at the ceiling, suddenly exhausted, drained, but unable to close her eyes. Eventually, with the lights still on, she began to doze . . .

7

Margaret slept late, mostly because she'd slept very little the night before. After untangling herself from the bedclothes, she cleaned up and dressed quickly, and it wasn't until she put on her makeup that she noticed something different about herself.

She couldn't put her finger on it at first, and simply stared at her reflection in the mirror, frowning. Then she leaned forward, moved her face close to the glass and touched a fingertip to the skin just

beneath one eye. Had that puffy little moon-shaped patch of flesh gotten a little smaller . . . maybe even a little less puffy?

Finally, Margaret smiled, laughed quietly at herself, stood up straight again and continued putting on her makeup.

“What’re you gonna do, complain?” she muttered to herself. “You get two hours of sleep and still look good, what’s to complain about? Hell, they weren’t even two consecutive hours.”

She went to the drive-through window of a Burger King and bought her breakfast — she was ravenous — and when she got to the hospital, she stopped at the gift shop to buy a bouquet of flowers in a sparkling vase.

Lynda was asleep when Margaret walked into the room, so she put the vase and her fast-food breakfast on the bed table, then went to the window and opened the blinds. Then she turned to the bed, put her hands on the side rail and looked down at Lynda, who only stirred slightly. When Lynda did not wake, Margaret went around the bed, seated herself in the chair and began to eat her breakfast. She almost never ate fast food because she was always watching her diet, and she’d *never* eaten the fat-loaded food from any of the major burger chains, but she found it deliciously decadent. She was still so hungry halfway through her second Croissantwich that she wished she’d ordered a third.

“Oh, how long have you been here?” Lynda asked, propping herself up on an elbow quite suddenly, her eyes squinty with sleep.

“Not long,” Margaret said with her mouth full. She smiled. “I’m eating a junk food breakfast. And you know what? It’s great! I didn’t know what I was missing.”

Lynda gasped. “Flowers!”

“Oh, yeah, I brought those for you. I thought you could use something pretty in here, something that stinks nice.”

Grasping the side rail, Lynda lifted herself into a sitting position with surprising ease as she stared at the flowers.

“You’re *wonderful!*” she squealed girlishly. “Oh, they’re gorgeous, really, Margaret. Thank you so much.”

Margaret was eating her bite-sized hash browns. “No problem. Hey, would you like some of this?”

Lynda reached behind her to fluff up her pillows, then sat up against the headboard. She smiled and said, “It sure smells good. But

I'm afraid that if I eat any of it, I'll puke all over you."

"Oh. Well, in that case . . . never mind."

Laughing, Lynda reached up to straighten the bandana on her head. "This thing's crooked," she grumbled quietly.

"Why do you wear it? If . . . you don't mind my asking."

"Not at all. I wore a wig for a while. I don't know which is more humiliating — being bald or wearing some stupid curly helmet that everybody *knows* is a wig. So, I settled for this. It's a compromise. I know I don't have hair, and *they* know I don't have hair . . . but I don't have to show everybody my ugly bald head."

"What's ugly about it? Didn't you see that *Star Trek* movie? Persis Khambata was completely bald, and she was gorgeous."

Lynda laughed and leaned on her side to watch her sister as she ate her two orders of hash browns.

"How do you stay so thin eating that kind of stuff?" Lynda asked.

"Listen, sweetie, after you've spent years sticking your finger down your throat to puke up food, and after years of taking laxatives and going on crash diets, every once in a while you deserve to give yourself a break without any guilt. I'll work it off."

Lynda sat up a little straighter, looking concerned. "You did all that? I mean . . . the throwing up and the laxatives? You did that to yourself?"

"To get thin? I would have done anything. Finally, I decided on just changing my life, my diet, my . . . schedule. I haven't had food like this in a long time, and it's delicious."

"Did you . . . do it because of . . . me?"

Margaret looked at her sister's face and saw sadness and worry. She reached over and covered Lynda's hand with hers on the side rail. "No, not because of you. I did it because of me, because I was fat. But I'm not fat anymore, am I?"

Lynda put her other hand on Margaret's and grinned. "My God, Maggie, you look fantastic. Really. You're so *pretty!*"

"Oh, get out of here. I slept in my car on the way here! I hardly slept at all last night . . . I look like I fell out of the back end of a sick horse."

"*Stop it!*" Lynda said with a giggle, slapping Margaret's hand.

Margaret put the small container of hash brown chunks on the bed table and stood, putting her other hand on Lynda's and looking at her sister very closely.

"Speaking of looks," she said, frowning ever so slightly as she stared down at Lynda, "you look pretty damned good yourself."

"Oh, yeah," Lynda said, leaning her head back to laugh. "I'm completely bald. I weigh ninety-one pounds, and I can't walk without help. I look *fantastic!*"

"No, really, I mean it. You look . . . I don't, know. There's something different about your face. You look different than you did yesterday."

Lynda's hand rose to pass over her face, touching it self-consciously — just her fingertips, brushing her flesh here and there. Then the hand dropped loosely to the bed.

"Maybe it's you," she said. "Maybe *you've* made me look better. I wouldn't be surprised. Because it's so good to have you here."

Margaret did not reply. She just kept staring at her sister. Lynda *did* look different. Maybe it was her imagination, her lack of sleep . . . but Lynda's face had something it did not have the day before. Her skin had more color in it and her eyes more life and sparkle.

But Margaret simply smiled and said, "I'm glad."

Lynda pulled her hand away. "Go on, finish your breakfast."

With a little reluctance, Margaret went back to her hash browns.

As she ate, Lynda said, very quietly. "Hey, you didn't get to meet my roommate yesterday. She was out for tests. From what I hear, she's got all the doctors stumped. Anyway, she's really old and she doesn't have anybody. Maybe after you're done eating, you could go see her and say hi. She gets so lonely. I don't think she's, um . . . you know, quite right, but . . . she's really nice, and she'd love it so much. Would you mind?"

Margaret *was* finished, but she smacked her lips over the tip of each finger before asking, "What's her name?"

"Mrs. Watkiss. That's all I know."

"Sure, I don't mind." She stood, stuffed the foil wrappers and cardboard containers into the Burger King bag, wadded them up and dropped them into the garbage can. After slapping her hands together a few times, she walked across the room toward the drape that was wrapped around the other bed and said, "Hello, in there."

A frail voice responded: "Yes?"

Margaret pulled the drape along its track and smiled at the old woman lying in bed. "Hello, Mrs. Watkiss. My name's Margaret. I'm your roommate's sister. I wanted to say hi."

The old woman's wrinkles were so deep and her skin so pasty, that they didn't look real; they looked like movie makeup or a latex mask with threads of thin white hair splaying from the top of the head and over her flat pillow. There were small bandages on her face — one over her right cheekbone, another on the line of her jaw just to the right of her chin, one on the side of her nose, and another in the center of her forehead. She squinted up at Margaret.

"Margaret, you say?" It was an effort, but after shifting her weight back and forth, looking like a beetle stranded on its back, she propped herself up on both elbows.

"That's right."

"Well, well, ain't you sweet," the old woman whispered through a weak smile. "To come see me, I mean. Ain't that just so nice."

"Would you like me to fluff that pillow and adjust your bed so you can sit up?"

"Would you? I'd like that, thanks."

Margaret used the control to adjust the head of the bed, then she leaned over for the deflated-looking pillow and fluffed it up. As she did so, she was a bit disconcerted by the intensity with which Mrs. Watkiss stared into her eyes. She wrapped an arm around the old woman's bony shoulders, lifted her up and slid the pillow beneath her head.

"Thanks," Mrs. Watkiss said again, still not taking her eyes from Margaret's. Her brow, lined with nothing more than the ghostly tufts of what used to be eyebrows, was drawn downward tensely above her bleary deep-set eyes. "You're real purty," she said, her slight, trembly smile clashing with her frown.

Margaret joined her hands behind her back and smiled nervously. "Thank you, that's very nice of you to say. Is there anything I can — "

"Just like your sister," Mrs. Watkiss continued. "She's purty, too. I can tell, even though . . . she's been so sick." She lowered her voice to a throaty whisper on the last four words. "She's real sweet, too. Just like you." She continued to smile, although it seemed quite an effort for her lips; she continued to frown, as well.

"Well, you don't look so bad yourself. Mrs. Watkiss," Margaret lied cheerfully. "Except for those little bandages. Have the nurses been beating up on you, or something?"

Another weak smile as she continued to stare into Margaret's eyes. "Well, see, they had to take these things offa my face. Somethin' called nelimonas, or . . . menilomas, or . . . somethin' like that."

"Melanomas?"

Mrs. Watkiss's eyebrows bobbed, eyes still staring. "Yeah, that's them. They had cancer in 'em, or somethin', I guess. So, they took 'em off."

"Then you must be glad they're gone."

"At this point, what do I care?"

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Mrs. Watkiss?" Margaret asked, her toes wiggling anxiously in her shoes. The old woman's stare was becoming more piercing by the second and it made Margaret feel as if she were being interrogated under hot lights. "Would you like a drink of water? I've got a few magazines, if you'd like to read."

Mrs. Watkiss waved her thick-veined, liver-spotted hand dismissively and rolled her head back and forth on the pillow, her eyes locked onto Margaret's the whole time. Then, slowly, she raised her hand and crooked her knobby, arthritic forefinger, beckoning Margaret to come closer. With her hands on the chrome side rail, Margaret leaned over the old woman.

"Happened to me, too," Mrs. Watkiss said, her voice little more than a breath. "When I was thirty-one. On a beautiful spring night. I was alone, tryin' to walk away my woes. My boyfriend had dropped me for another girl, so I was feeling low, see. And then . . . there they were alla sudden. And they gave it to me . . . what they gave to you. A gift from above, honey, that's what it is. Every bit as much a gift as the breath of life God gave us all."

Margaret felt a tingling on the back of her neck as she glanced over her shoulder to see Lynda lying on her side, fast asleep.

"Maybe I shouldn't be tellin' you this, I don't know. I ain't so good with words, y'know? Can't really express myself so well. I never got much education. But I got this feelin', see. Prob'ly ain't too many of us around. Maybe I should tell you what I know, even if I don't do it so good." She paused and took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "See at first, I was real afraid of 'em. I'm sure you were, too. I was even afraid afterwards, when it was all over. Took awhile for me to figure out just what had happened . . . what what'd been done to me. But, oh,

then when I realized . . .” She raised her hand and rested it on Margaret’s, which had gone white as it gripped the chrome rail.

Suddenly, something shot up Margaret’s spinal column and exploded inside her skull:

Green light . . . the shimmering green glow all around her as she lies flat on a cold, hard slab . . . and the faces above her . . . no mouths or noses, but enormous oval eyes of deep, glistening black . . . and the hands reaching for her, with their long, stick-like fingers, each with four knuckles . . . touching her . . . stroking and prodding and exploring . . . and all the while, she is paralyzed, unable to move, to speak, even unable to take a very deep breath . . .

“You okay, honey?” Mrs. Watkiss asked, patting Margaret’s tense hand as she lifted her head a couple inches off the pillow.

Margaret felt a bead of perspiration trickle down her side from her armpit and she had the sudden urge to start gulping air as if she were suffocating. “Fine. I’m . . . fine.”

“Well, then . . . where was I? Oh, yeah. I didn’t say nothin’ to anyone about what happened that night. Who’d believe me, anyway? Some people really get their cookies on that sort of thing, even go on them television talk shows to tell about it. But I’m just not the type to go around claimin’ that somethin’ the size of a city block came out of the sky and some funny lookin’ people took me inside to hook me up to some machines.”

It happened again, and like before, it filled nothing more than a fraction of a second in time, but inside Margaret’s head it was a small, shrieking eternity:

Something is suspended several feet over her head, lowering slowly. It is made of a shiny, silvery metal and has four spidery legs on each side, which move as it nears her. They contract, until they are about the right size to fit snugly around her skull. Two small, oval cups are positioned above three spaghetti-like tubes, which emerge from the center of the object — two on top and one below — with quivering jewels of moisture clinging to the tip of each. The device is less than two inches away from pressing over her face and clamping itself onto her head when Margaret realizes that the cups will fit over her eyes, and the upper tubes will go into her nostrils, while the single, lower tube will enter her mouth. She tries to close her mouth, which has been open wide as if to yawn ever since she arrived, but she cannot.

Even her lips and eyelids are numb and useless, paralyzed. She is able to do nothing more than watch as the shiny device covers her face and replaces the green glow with utter darkness . . .

Margaret blinked rapidly and swallowed hard several times; her throat was suddenly dry and scratchy, as if she had been screaming.

"You sure you're all right, honey?" Mrs. Watkiss asked. "You're lookin' pale?"

"Tired," Margaret said tightly. "That's all. I drove from Los Angeles and I'm . . . tired."

"Well, you'll feel better soon. You got somethin' that'll keep you well. I tell ya. And I know, better than anyone." She smiled, her thin lips wrinkling back over long yellowed teeth. "I didn't tell anyone about what happened — you're the first and only, in fact — but that didn't keep me from usin' the gift. I used it quiet-like, without nobody knowin'. But *I* knew. And I can't tell you how . . . *wonderful* it was," she went on in her raspy whisper, giving Margaret's hand a squeeze, "to be able to do the things I could do then. At first, anyway. But then . . . it went bad. Not the *gift*, no, I ain't sayin' that. *I* went bad, see. It was *me*. I could do real good things, yeah, sure. But boy, I tell ya . . . I could do some . . . some real bad things. Bad, bad things." Her face darkened as she shook her head slowly. "The gift, see . . . it can't go bad. Only the person who gets it's the one who can go sour. At least, that was . . . my experience."

As she listened, Margaret felt as if the hair on her head was moving forward and backward in waves, and beneath her clothes, her skin streaked with rivulets of perspiration, crawled with chilly gooseflesh.

"Don't you let that happen to you, Margaret. What happened to me, I mean."

Margaret had to lick her lips and swallow again before attempting to speak. "And exactly . . . what happened . . . to you?"

"Like I said, I went bad. I soured. I let the *gift* down, not the other way around. Lotsa good things can be done with the gift. Lotsa bad things, too. But you gotta make a decision, I guess." She lifted her head from the pillow. "Promise me you won't sour on the gift like I did. Use it the way it was *meant* to be used." Her head turned on its spindly neck, and Margaret looked over her shoulder, following the old woman's gaze to find that she was looking at Lynda, who was still asleep.

When Margaret looked at Mrs. Watkiss again, her head was back on the pillow. Clearing her throat, Margaret said, "Um, I'm not sure I know what you're talking about, Mrs. — "

"Oh, sure you do. You the first one I've met, you know. I didn't even know it was possible to recognize another like me till I saw your eyes. I knew right away. I still ain't sure how, I just . . . *knew*. You've got the gift, all right, no doubt about that. Here . . ." She reached up and lightly touched four fingertips to Margaret's temple. ". . . and here. That's where it nests, best I can tell." She placed her hand back on Margaret's, patting it in a comforting grandmotherly way.

Margaret could only stare, lips parted, at the old woman. She could think of nothing more to say.

Mrs. Watkiss's small gray head seemed to sink into the pillow as her paper-thin eyelids closed halfway. She seemed exhausted from all the talk.

"You was sure sweet to come see me," Mrs. Watkiss said, her voice growing hoarse. "You go back to your sister now. That's where you can do the most good." She closed her eyes, the hint of a smile on her weathered lips, and drifted off. Her hands slipped off of Margaret's and dropped to the bed. Her nose made a small whistling sound as she breathed.

Margaret took a few slow steps backward, drawing the drape back into place. Checking to make sure Lynda was still asleep, she hurried into the bathroom, locked the door behind her and vomited her breakfast into the toilet . . .

8

Holding a cold paper towel to the back of her neck. Margaret leaned against the bathroom wall trying to pull herself together. Her mind was going in so many directions at once that she wasn't sure that pulling herself together was a viable option.

She's just an old woman, Margaret kept thinking, trying to make the words convincing. Even Lynda said she wasn't quite right. She's just crazy, that's all. And she just happened to catch me at a weak moment.

As she dabbed her face with the paper towel, she thought, Then again, maybe it's not a weak moment. Maybe I'm going crazy, too.

After rinsing her mouth and running her fingers through her hair, she went back to Lynda's bedside to find her sister still asleep on her side, her right hand hanging limply over the bottom bar of the side rail. Margaret lowered herself into the chair slowly, staring at Lynda's face, narrowing her eyes as she studied it.

Yes, it looked different than it had yesterday, there was no question. Even in sleep, there was more color in her cheeks. Yesterday, it had been a taut face, stiff as a plastic Halloween mask, as if reacting to pain at every moment, even while sleeping; now it was a relaxed face, smoother, still much too thin, but without the tension it had held the day before. The bandana was wrapped crookedly around her head, revealing some of her nearly bare crown; a shadow made up of tiny, fine hairs darkened her scalp, as if her head had been shaved and her hair was trying hard to recover. Margaret looked down at the bony hand hanging off the edge of the mattress.

You've got the gift, all right, Mrs. Watkiss had said, touching Margaret's temple, then her hand. Here . . . and here.

Margaret stared at her own right hand, turning it this way and that, inspecting the five-fingered appendage as if it belonged to someone else.

You go back to your sister now. That's where you can do the most good.

. . . the most good . . .

When she listened carefully, Margaret could still hear Mrs. Watkiss's nose whistling quietly as she slept.

Making a decision, Margaret put the television remote in her lap and turned it on, then curled a hand around Lynda's, careful not to disturb her sleep. Then, Margaret sat in the chair, watching the silent television, and holding her sister's hand, having decided to hold it as long as was necessary . . . just in case there was any truth to the old woman's craziness . . .

9

Margaret awoke suddenly in the chair at the gentle sound of Lynda's voice. "Hey, sleepyhead."

"Good grief," she mumbled, sitting up straight in the chair, "I dozed off. That's *your* job." She did a double take at her sister.

Lynda was not just sitting up in bed . . . she was *sitting up*, skinny legs crossed Indian-style, her body facing Margaret, smiling. She was shaking her right hand and wagging the fingers.

"You were holding my hand," Lynda said.

"Yeah, I guess I was."

"No, I mean you were really *holding it*," she said with a chuckle. "It went to sleep."

"Oh. Sorry."

"No, don't apologize. I'm touched, really. In fact . . . I'm puzzled."

"About what?"

"Well . . . I know we agreed to put the past behind us yesterday, but . . . I can't help wondering exactly why you came here. Was it for your high school reunion? Or did you actually come to see me after hating me all these years?"

Margaret sighed. "Look, we're the only family we've got. And even I couldn't go on hating you forever," she added with a smirk.

After a reluctant pause, Lynda asked, "So, does that mean you don't hate Mom and Dad anymore?"

Margaret sighed again, more sharply this time. "I guess some things are easier to get over than others."

"You know, they didn't hate you."

"Please, Lynda, do we have to — "

"Just listen a minute, okay? I've been thinking about this ever since you left here yesterday and I want to get this off my chest. Now, I know you hated them, maybe even more than you hated me. And you had good reason. They were cold people. You and I were different; I could see beneath their crust, but you didn't want to look. Then you left for the big city and I stayed home and got married, which was the only thing I really wanted to do, I guess. Anyway, you were gone, so you didn't see what I saw. You know, they really loved you, Margaret."

"Nice of them to let you know. Of course, it would've been nice if they'd filled *me* in on the secret."

"They talked about you a lot. They were very proud of your success in advertising. When Mom was killed in the car accident, Dad completely fell apart. I've never seen a man cry so much. I had to care for him like a baby. But even though I was waiting on him hand and foot, I felt like nothing more than an annoyance to him . . . because he kept

asking for you. He wanted to know why you weren't at the funeral, why you hadn't called, or at least written. By then, you hadn't written in a long time and none of us knew how to reach you. He started drinking heavily, then got cancer. Right up to the end, he kept asking for you. He hardly knew who he was, but . . . the last thing he said to me before going into the coma was, Tell Maggie how much her mother and I loved her . . . and that we're both sorry.'"

By the time Lynda finished, Margaret's head was bowed so far forward that her chin rested on her collarbone. Her eyes were stinging from the tears that were dropping into her lap.

"Oh, please don't cry. I'm not trying to make you feel guilty, or anything. I just wanted you to know that behind their cold, unaffectionate fronts, they loved us both very much. They loved you. So now, you can love them, too. Just because they're gone doesn't mean it's too late. Now please, Margaret, don't cry."

Margaret did not move or make a sound.

Lynda got up on her knees and reached out her hand. "Come here. Please, come over here."

Margaret stood and silently embraced her sister, surprised by the strength in Lynda's arms as she held Margaret close. With the faint sound of air whistling in and out of Mrs. Watkiss's nose beyond the drape behind her, Margaret smoothly slid her hands over Lynda's bony back, willing the crazy old woman's story to be true . . . praying that it was true.

"Now stop crying," Lynda whispered into her ear. "I'm the dying patient, I'm supposed to be crying."

When Lynda tried to pull away, Margaret held on to her and said, "No, not yet. Just a little longer. Please."

A moment later, Margaret backed away from the bed, removed her compact from her purse and gasped at her reflection as she sat down in the chair. "Oh, God. I look like a raccoon." She grabbed a small box of tissues from the bed table and began to clean her face.

"I'm glad you came to see me, Margaret. I really am. It makes me feel so . . . you know, this might sound stupid, but it makes me feel young. I even feel a little hungry. I might have some Jell-O later."

As she reapplied her mascara, Margaret glanced at Lynda, surprised by her sudden surge in energy. She was sitting Indian-style on the bed again, bouncing ever so slightly, like a schoolgirl sharing

secrets with her girlfriends at a slumber party.

Lynda said. "I wish I could go to that reunion with you Saturday night, just to watch, just to see their reactions. You're gonna knock 'em dead. Are you going to the cocktail party, the dinner, or both?"

"I don't even know if I'm going to the damned thing." Margaret said, slapping her compact shut and slipping it back into her purse. "I think I'd rather spend the weekend with you. You know, I could rent a VCR and hook it up to that thing — " She nodded toward the television on the wall. " — and rent a few movies. Wouldn't that be fun? We could even — "

"You can't be serious, Margaret!" Lynda hissed, leaning forward. "You have to go to that reunion, I mean . . . well, you just *have* to!"

"I can't imagine why."

"Cut the false modesty. You know *exactly* why. Because you're going to make them sizzle with jealousy. Don't tell me you haven't thought about it. Fat and homely Margaret shows up at the reunion and makes the eyes pop out of all those balding heads, makes hearts pound above all those beer bellies, makes all those former cheerleading sex kittens green with envy. For someone who can hold a grudge for so long, how could you possibly *resist* such an opportunity? I mean, can you imagine how Albert Huffman would react?"

"Albert Huffman? Your old boyfriend?"

"Oh, stop it. You know we didn't even do it, Albert and me."

"You didn't? But I thought you said — "

"I was just being nasty, Margaret. And I'm sorry. But the *reason* we didn't do it was that he was a loser, a real zero. You could've done so much better."

"Hah! I couldn't even do *worse* back then."

They began to do all the giggling and dishing they had never done as girls. They talked about Becky Gilbert, a cheerleader who had talked Mark Gepper, a butcher's son, into filling Margaret's locker with pig's feet.

They remembered Daryl Cotch, the quarterback, and Amelia Turner, captain of the cheerleading team, who had been The Couple at school in those days, who had always joked about Margaret whenever she was in earshot; Amelia would say things like, "Stop looking at her, Daryl! I know you're lusting after her! If I ever catch you two together, I'll *kill* you!" and Daryl would say, "But she's just so gor-

geous, Amelia . . . so sexy . . . I can't keep my eyes off her. She's incredible!" Then, everyone around Margaret would laugh.

They laughed about Brandon Lyons, who was rumored to be the most well-endowed male at school; Brandon had been as handsome as he was empty-headed, and he knew he could have any girl on campus. He was forever tormenting Margaret in public: "How come *you* don't seem to be interested in me, huh, Maggie? All the other girls are. They can't *wait* to get to my love pump! Hey, how about this — you can think of it as a big fat sausage, huh? Does that sound good? You can think of it as food! Maybe a gigantic popsicle! Would that change your mind?" There were others, and Margaret and Lynda laughingly roasted them all.

Marty Cullen came up, as well. While Margaret was busy being the school fat-ugly girl, Marty was stuck with being the school nerd-fairy. He'd been tall and painfully skinny, with an Adam's apple nearly as big as his chin. His bony, long-limbed clumsiness had been as much of a joke to everyone as Margaret's girth and homely features. As far as Margaret knew, he'd never had a single date during his high school years; he'd been a loner, stumbling from one class to the next, trying his best to avoid everyone else, as afraid of them as she had been. The boys called him everything from "weasel" to "fag"; the girls, of course, didn't need to call him names, using far more subtle, and no doubt more cruel and painful, methods of torture. But Margaret remembered Marty as being very smart. He'd helped her with a couple of classes in which she had not exactly excelled, such as math and science. Especially math. He'd been a whiz at numbers.

"Come on, Lynda," Margaret said as their laughter died away. "Maybe I'm not fat anymore, but I can promise you that nobody's going to put a sash over my shoulder and hand me a bouquet of roses. There's a lot of mileage on this body, and my odometer just happens to be my face."

Lynda shook her head slowly as she nibbled on her lower lip. "You need a reality check, girl." She spun around on the mattress and stood on the opposite side of the bed, grabbing the I.V. pole with her right hand.

"What are you doing?" Margaret asked, a hint of panic in her voice. "Are you even supposed to be out of bed?"

“Don’t worry, I’m fine. Come here.” She went to the sink beneath and to the right of television set. Turning to Margaret, she beckoned with her left hand. “Come here to me.”

Cautiously, Margaret stood and went to Lynda, keeping a distance of about two feet.

Lynda laughed. “What’s the matter, afraid of me, or something? Come here, in front of the mirror.”

Margaret felt her heartbeat speed up, remembering all those times Lynda had made her stand in front of a mirror so she could point out to Margaret just how fat and ugly she was.

Lynda put an arm around Margaret’s shoulder and pulled her over to the mirror. Standing behind her, Lynda put her hands on Margaret’s shoulders.

“Now look at yourself, Margaret,” Lynda said, smiling. “Am I wrong? Was I lying? No, I wasn’t wrong. You’re beautiful. I mean, aside from a little runny mascara, you are really a knock-out.”

Margaret’s jaw slowly went slack as she stared at her reflection. She flipped the switch to the left of the sink and a light came on above the mirror. She looked even more dumbfounded as she leaned over the sink, bringing her face close to the mirror.

Her skin was beautifully, youthfully, and unbelievably smooth. She touched two fingertips to the flesh beneath her right eye which, very recently, had been puffy and baggy. It was not puffy and baggy now. Even the tiny wrinkles on her eyelids and around her eyes and the crow’s feet at the corners were all gone. The wrinkles around her lips had disappeared, and her lips looked full, though a bit chapped.

“My God,” Margaret breathed, touching her face with both hands now, moving her fingertips over her skin gently, in wonder. “My . . . God.”

“Oh, come on. You can’t be *that* shocked. You had to know how great you looked, Margaret.” Lynda was still smiling, but her smile began to melt away as she stared at Margaret’s shocked expression in the mirror.

You’ve been given something that will keep you well, dear, Mrs. Watkiss had said. Is this what she’d meant by “well”?

It was true, Margaret thought. Everything she said was true . . . and my face proves it.

“Margaret? Are you all right?”

"Fine, yes," Margaret whispered as she stood up straight, never taking her eyes from her reflection.

"You're sure?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure. Um, look . . . I came over to the mirror, like you asked. Now — " She turned around and faced Lynda, who took a step back. " — I'm going to ask you to do something for me."

Lynda nodded cautiously. "Okay."

"Go lie down. On your bed. I'm going to sit in that chair. And we're going to hold hands."

"What?"

"We can talk or watch TV or listen to the radio, whatever you want, but we . . . are going . . . to hold . . . hands. Understand me?"

"Are you sure everything's . . . okay?"

"Never better," Margaret said with a big smile. It was the kind of smile she couldn't control, couldn't hold in, and it felt wonderful. "Just do it. And don't ask questions, okay?"

Lynda returned to her bed and Margaret to her chair. And they held hands. Tightly.

And as Mrs. Watkiss's nose whistled behind the drape, Margaret felt a swelling inside in her chest that she had never felt before. It was a happy feeling, giddy, even a little magical.

She squeezed her dying sister's hand a little harder . . .

10

Lynda had drifted off during the first half of an old Barbara Stanwyck tear-jerker, which was now swelling with music in its final scene. Before that, they'd watched part of the news, then the shopping channel for a while, making fun of the merchandise as well as the bloated prices. Lying on her side, Lynda's limp hands were clutched firmly in Margaret's. They'd only let go so Lynda could change positions on the bed and change channels with the remote, and to occasionally scratch her head through the bandana; in fact, she'd clawed at it furiously every few minutes. Otherwise, their hands had been locked together ever since they'd left the mirror over the sink.

And still, Mrs. Watkiss's nose continued to whistle steadily beyond the drape.

The Barbara Stanwyck movie was followed by *Love Connection*, but Margaret wasn't paying much attention. Her hands had fallen asleep long ago, but she ignored that. She could live with numb hands . . . if only Lynda could live. But now, she was beginning to doze off herself, her head nodding forward, breath rattling through her pinched throat.

She was awakened suddenly by the footsteps of a tall, slender, handsome young man — thirty-five at the oldest — who entered the room wearing a white coat, with part of a stethoscope dangling from the right pocket, and holding a clipboard in his right hand. He had thick, curly, dark brown hair, lovely brown eyes with long, thick lashes and a healthy tan.

"Oh," he said, his eyebrows shooting up high. "I didn't realize Lynda had a visitor."

Sitting up straight, but still holding Lynda's hands, Margaret said, "I'm her sister. Margaret."

He smiled and nodded. "Nice to meet you. I'm Dr. Plummer."

"Really? So, which are you? A doctor or a plumber?"

He chuckled and looked away with an almost boyish bashfulness. "I came to see how she was doing," he said, looking at the clipboard.

They spoke quietly to one another.

"She's asleep," Margaret said.

"Yes, I see. That's to be expected."

"Why?"

"What?"

"Why is that to be expected?"

"Um . . . how much do you know about her condition?"

"I know she has cancer, and that she's, you know . . . dying." Her voice dropped to a broken whisper on the last word.

"Well, yes, that's a fairly accurate, if abrupt, description of her condition. Her sleeping is a reaction to the chemotherapy, and the — "

"Dr. Plummer!" Lynda said happily, raising her head from the pillow with a smile. She pulled her hands away from Margaret's and sat up energetically, curling her feet beneath her in the Indian-style position she'd taken earlier that day. Reaching up to scratch her head through the bandana, she said, "This is my sister Margaret. Margaret, this is my doctor, Dr. Plummer."

Dr. Plummer's lips twitched and his chin dropped as he stared at Lynda. His dark brown eyes were wide as he said, "Yes, uh . . . we met."

"Oh, good," Lynda said. "Sorry I was asleep. We were watching a movie I'd seen before, and I just drifted off." This time she took both hands to her head, digging her nails into each side furiously.

Blinking rapidly, Dr. Plummer asked, "So, Lynda, how do you . . . feel?"

"Pretty good. In fact, believe it or not, I'm feeling kind of hungry. I was feeling hungry earlier, and I thought it was just a false alarm, but I really think I could use some Jell-O, or maybe some soup." Scratch, scratch, scratch. "In fact, soup sounds good. Something hot."

"You're . . . hungry." He was not asking a question.

Lynda nodded, smiling.

Dr. Plummer walked around the bed and sat on the side opposite Margaret. "Okay, let's have a look." He pressed his fingertips under her jaw, then asked her to lift her arms and felt her armpits. His eyes widened as his brow lowered, and his jaw dropped slowly, opening his mouth behind closed lips. Then he touched her face here and there, as if he were fascinated with it, as if it were a completely foreign object, something he'd never seen before.

Lynda reached up with both hands again to scratch her head, squinting as she did so.

"You're scratching a lot," Dr. Plummer said. "Do you have a rash?"

"I don't think so. My head's just itching. It's been driving me crazy."

"It's probably the hair," Margaret said casually.

Dr. Plummer turned to her. "Hair? What hair? She's on chemo."

"Well, she's got some peach fuzz under that bandana," Margaret said with a gesture of her hand. "It's probably making her head itch."

"Oh, no. That can't be." He looked at Lynda again, his lips parted. He reached up, removed the bandana and dropped it into Lynda's lap.

Her head was covered with a thin layer of salt and pepper down.

Dr. Plummer muttered something to himself that was unintelligible, but which had the sound of a very soft curse. He lifted a hand and ran it over her head slowly, his jaw hanging low once again.

"Your hair's growing back," he said, his voice breaking.

"Really?" Lynda asked, reaching up to feel for herself. "Is that bad?"

Ignoring her question, Dr. Plummer began to page through her chart his eyes scanning the pages carefully. He frowned down at the chart for a long time, chewing a lip, then: "You're still on chemotherapy."

"Yes, I am," Lynda said.

He looked at her again, reached up and touched her scalp again. "And your hair's growing back."

"Is that bad, Dr. Plummer?"

"Well, it's-it's-it's not bad, really, just . . . unusual."

"Why?"

"Well . . . it's just thuh- that . . . you lost your hair due to a reaction from the chemotherapy, which affected your follicles. The hair doesn't grow back until weeks after the chemo has been discontinued. But . . . you-you-you have hair."

"Really? So, what do you think? Should I go to the beauty parlor? Have it styled?" She laughed.

Dr. Plummer did not. He leaned away from her and stared at her as sternly as a teacher sizing up a troublesome student. He licked his lips, then plucked a pen from a pocket and made a note on the chart.

"I'm scheduling you for a test," he said. "Tomorrow. Nothing painful, don't worry. Just . . . a test."

Lynda's smile disappeared. "Is something wrong, Dr. Plummer?"

"Uh, no. No, you have nothing to worry about. It's just that your body is behaving in, uh . . . a rather uh-unorthodox manner." He lifted his eyes from the chart and stared at her rather suspiciously. "How do you feel? Physically?"

"Well, I feel good. In fact, I feel better than I've felt in a long time. Maybe because I'm so happy that Margaret showed up, I don't know. But I feel really good." Her smile returned, then became a big grin.

Dr. Plummer smiled as well, but his was forced and stiff. "I'm glad. You'll be having this test tomorrow morning, first thing. I'll be in to see you as soon as I get the results."

"You're sure nothing's wrong?"

Not that I can see. Not at all." He stood. "You were serious about that soup?"

"Oh, yes. It sounds delicious."

"I'll see that you get it." He walked around the bed toward the door, then stopped and turned to Margaret. Speaking distractedly, as if his

mind were elsewhere, he said, "Nice to meet you. I'd like to get together for a talk tomorrow. Is that okay with you?"

"That'll be fine," Margaret said.

He left smiling, but with a puzzled frown.

"Well, I wonder what *that* was all about," Lynda said, rubbing her palms together absently, energetically.

"Maybe it's something good," Margaret said, feeling that swelling in her chest again.

"Maybe, who knows? So, anymore good movies on?"

"I'll make you a deal."

"What's that?"

Margaret looked out the window to see that the sky was darkening, the day ending.

"We'll find a good movie," Margaret said, "then we'll hold hands some more."

Lynda frowned at her. "What is it with you and holding — "

"I told you. No questions. Agreed?"

Lynda sighed and shook her head, smiling. "Agreed."

They found a movie. And then they held hands . . .

11

The next morning, Margaret took an invigorating and tinglingly hot shower in her motel room, then scrubbed herself dry with the motel's cheap, thin towel. Standing naked before the fogged mirror over the sink, Margaret leaned forward and wiped her hand back and forth over the glass, wiping away the moisture. She glanced at her reflection . . . and then she froze. Her hand was frozen halfway to her toothbrush, her head down, her back suddenly rigid.

Margaret's head turned slowly back to the mirror, to her reflection. She squinted at her face, leaning forward.

"Holy shit," she muttered as she picked up her towel and swept it back and forth over the whole mirror, trying to clear it up. Bits of lint clung to the glass, but the reflection was much clearer than before.

She dropped the towel to the floor and slapped her palms onto the Formica on each side of the sink, leaning close to the mirror so she could inspect her face.

It was not her face. At least, that was how she felt initially. It might have been her face way back when . . . back when she was fat, *if*, of course, she hadn't been fat. But it couldn't possibly be her face *now*, could it? Today? At the age of forty-two? After regular trips to the plastic surgeon? After developing wrinkles and baggy patches before her time because of all those little operations meant to maintain her youth and beauty? She hadn't looked this good yesterday evening in Lynda's mirror . . . and she thought she'd looked pretty damned good then!

She began to laugh. She didn't mean to, but the laughter came out of her independently. She was unable to control it. She laughed until tears rolled down her cheeks.

Lynda had been right.

Margaret *would* knock them dead at the reunion . . .

12

Margaret took three steps into Lynda's hospital room with a paper bag clutched in her right hand before she stumbled to a clumsy halt.

Lynda's bed was empty. It had been made neatly, as if the maid had just left . . . but it was empty.

"Oh, my God," Margaret groaned. She rushed forward and tossed the bag onto the chair. "Lynda, oh my *God!*"

An ugly, phlegmy cough came from behind Mrs. Watkiss's drape.

"She's gone," the old woman rasped.

Margaret went to the drape and pulled it back.

"Not dead, just gone," Mrs. Watkiss said. "For tests, I heard 'em say. You should know better than anyone that she ain't dead."

Margaret stepped to the side of the bed and put her hands on the side rail.

Mrs. Watkiss was smiling up at her, and her bleary eyes looked happy.

"She's better, ain't she? A *lot* better, I bet."

"Well," Margaret said, "her doctor seemed surprised last night when she asked for soup."

"Yeah, 'course. And I bet that's why she's out for tests. They're confused. They're gonna *stay* confused, too, I promise you. You're gonna give 'em the puzzle of their lives."

Margaret leaned forward. "Mrs. Watkiss, what you told me yesterday . . . well, um, do you remember talking to me yesterday?"

"Honey, if my body was a building, they'd take a wreckin' ball to it. But I still got my mind. 'Course I remember."

"Well, you were talking about this . . . *gift* that I've been given."

"Yeah?"

"Can you tell me anymore about it?"

"Mm. Must've happened recently. I can understand your confusion. When I first saw 'em coming out of the sky, I was terrified. I bet you were, too, huh?"

Margaret nodded.

"Took some time for the memory of it all to gel, you know? Even the memory was scary at first. Maybe that's your problem. Too recent. You're still afraid. Is that it?"

"Well, yes . . . I'm a little afraid. The memories . . . well, they keep coming to me in these horrible . . . they're like nightmares."

The old woman closed her eyes and nodded. "Yeah, I know. But you have an advantage. The memories might still be comin', but you *know* you got the gift. I didn't have someone to talk to about it like you do. I'm glad we found each other. And look at your pretty face, Margaret. You look much younger than you did yesterday, and so pretty." She smiled, but her eyes were only half open, as if she were very tired and about to fall asleep. "And I bet you're knowin' your sister's better. Ain't that right?"

"Yes," Margaret said, nodding. "But . . . what about you?"

"What about me, honey?"

Margaret reached down and took Mrs. Watkiss's knobby, veined hand between hers, smiling.

"Oh, that's sweet of ya. But you don't understand my problem. I ain't just sick, I'm . . . well, I went bad and soured the gift I don't know if even you could help me now, havin' the gift yourself. You don't worry about me." She patted Margaret's wrist with her other hand. "You just concentrate on your sister. She's the one you should be helping. And you keep thinkin' 'bout what I've told ya. Use that gift the way it's supposed to be used. For good. For your sister. And other folks like her."

Mrs. Watkiss pulled her hand away and closed her eyes for a long moment, and Margaret feared she'd fallen asleep, until she opened them again.

“So . . . I should just keep doing what I’m doing?” Margaret asked.

The nod was slow and weak, like the old woman’s voice. “Yeah. Do what you’re doin’. Just . . . don’t go bad. Don’t go sour on the gift . . . like I did.” Then Mrs. Watkiss went to sleep. She made a quiet snoring sound in her throat, and her nose began to whistle again.

Margaret replaced the drape and went to her chair, placing the paper bag in her lap. She was starving, and this time she’d bought plenty of fast food . . .

13

Margaret heard Lynda’s voice outside the room, growing louder and clearer as it came down the corridor.

“ — and then all of a sudden she just shows up! I mean, I can’t tell you how surprised I was. It was *great!* Seeing her after all these years? Oh, I can’t tell you how wonderful it was, Mary.”

Margaret recognized Mary’s voice: “Well, darlin’, it must’ve done ya some good, ’cause Dr. Plummer was sure pleased with ya.”

“Really?” Lynda asked. “I didn’t see him before I left.”

“Oh, you’ll be seein’ him soon, I’m sure, lass.”

“He really thinks I’m doing better? Really?”

“I’m only a lowly nurse, m’dear. Wouldn’t know about that. You’ll have to ask him. But I can tell you this much,” Mary said as she pushed Lynda into the room in her wheelchair, “I’ve never heard you talkin’ this much before. You *must* be better.”

“Margaret!” Lynda blurted through a grin. “I hope you weren’t waiting long.” She got out of the wheelchair while it was still moving, her right hand wrapped around the I.V. pole.

“Lynda!” Mary snapped. “Y’want me to chop off your heels with this thing?”

Lynda ignored her. She stood in front of Margaret, leaning against the bed’s side rail. “So, what’s for breakfast today?”

Margaret smiled, chewing her food. “You name it, I’ve probably got it here. Two breakfast sandwiches, a breakfast burrito, scrambled eggs, French toast sticks — ”

“Oh, those look good.” Lynda plucked one of the sticks from Margaret’s lap, where everything was neatly arranged on the flattened

bag. She plopped the whole thing into her mouth and chewed enthusiastically. "Mmm, great."

"I've got some syrup, if you want to dip them."

Lynda took another and dipped it into the small container of syrup. "Even better!" she said, talking with her mouth full.

"You sure you wanna be eatin' that, love?" Mary asked. "I mean, if you're hungry, that's good. But maybe you should be startin' with somethin' a little easier to digest."

"No, I'm fine," Lynda said casually, almost dismissively. "Mary, my sister Margaret. Margaret, my favorite nurse Mary."

Then she walked around the bed with her I.V. pole, flopped onto the mattress like a child and once again assumed her Indian-style sitting position. Before Mary could leave the room with the wheelchair, Lynda said, "Hey, Mary, do you think I could get something to eat?"

The woman — in her forties, slender, with dark hair — turned to Lynda.

"Well, honey, if you're feelin' like a bite, maybe I could bring some Jell-O or some —"

"No, no, I mean something like a sandwich."

Mary propped a fist on her hip, her elbow jutting. "Oh, it's a sandwich you're wantin'." Smirking, she added, "And I suppose I'll be cleanin' the mess after it's gone down and come back up again."

"I had a bowl of soup last night. That didn't come back up."

"Well, there's a big difference between soup and a sandwich. Soup or Jell-O I can get you. Anything more solid than that, you'll have to talk to Dr. Plummer. He'll be in soon."

Lynda shrugged. "Okay, Mary. Thanks."

The nurse started out of the room, but stopped again and turned to Lynda, pointing at Margaret's lap. "And don't be eatin' none of that stuff, either. You start spittin' it all back up, I just might make you clean the mess, lassie!"

As Mary pushed the wheelchair out of the room, Lynda laughed and said to Margaret, "I love her. She likes to make everybody think she's a tough cookie, but she's really very sweet. And funny, too. So. How are you?"

"Well, if I keep this up, I'm going to be very fat again, very fast." Margaret put her breakfast on the bed table beside the vase of flowers she'd brought the day before. "What kind of tests did they do?"

"Just one. An MRI. No big deal. Dr. Plummer said he'd be in right away, but I'll bet we don't see him until this afternoon. That's the way these doctor's work, no matter how good looking they are. So, tell me, Margaret. Are you going to the reunion tomorrow night?"

"Yes, that's right, today's Friday. It's tomorrow, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh. And you're going, aren't you? I bet you even brought a nice dress with you, didn't you?"

"Well . . . I brought one nice dress, yes. But I'm thinking maybe I should go out and buy a new one for the occasion. If I go that is."

"Good girl. And I know just the place. Daphne's. It's a little hole in the wall right in the middle of town. Daphne carries some great stuff, and it's all perfect for your body. And I have a tab at Daphne's. I'll call ahead and you can —"

"I've got money, Lynda. For crying out loud, why would I want to put my dress on your tab?"

"Hey, I've got money, and I don't want it hanging around after I'm gone, okay?"

Margaret stood and placed her hands on the bed's side rail. "You don't look to me like somebody who's going anywhere."

"Yeah, sure. Talk to my doctor. He's got all kinds of medical double-talk that'll change your mind."

As if he'd been standing off-stage waiting for his cue, Dr. Plummer walked into the room. This time, he did not have Lynda's chart, and there wasn't a stethoscope to be seen on him. His face held an expression of vague surprise, even confusion. He stopped at the foot of Lynda's bed, gave Margaret a brief, crooked smile, then looked at Lynda.

"Hello, Lynda."

"Hey, Doc."

"How do you feel right now?"

"Hungry. Like I could eat a live water buffalo with my hands tied behind my back."

"Really?"

"Really. So, how about that test?"

"Well, your results were, um . . ." He cleared his throat and swept a finger back and forth over his lips. "They were quite good. Very encouraging, in fact."

Lynda's face registered surprise. "Really? How good is that?"

"Better than I expected."

"So, I'm going to live?" she asked with a sarcastic smirk.

"Live. Well. Um. I . . . I, uh, can say that you've improved."

Her smirk fell away and her eyebrows rose. "Improved? Really?"

"Yes. But, if you don't mind, I'd like to steal your sister away for a little while."

"Oh, I *bet* you would. She's gorgeous, isn't she?"

Dr. Plummer smiled and closed his eyes for just a moment. "I mean for a talk. Just a talk. Over coffee?"

"Yeah, but she *is* gorgeous, isn't she?"

"Lynda, please," Margaret hissed.

Dr. Plummer looked at Margaret with a bashful smile and nodded once. "Yes, she is very attractive."

Margaret, amused but embarrassed, said, "Thank you, but Lynda is just reverting back to her childhood. She used to embarrass me all the time back then, too."

"The nurse said you were hungry," Dr. Plummer said to Lynda.

"I just said I was hungry, doesn't *that* count? It has to come from a nurse before you'll believe it? I'm *starving*. Can I have something?"

"What would you like?"

"A sandwich."

"What kind of sandwich would you like?"

"A steak sandwich."

Dr. Plummer's eyebrows rose. "A steak sandwich."

"Yes. A steak sandwich."

He nodded slowly. "Anything else?"

"Onion rings?"

"A steak sandwich and onion rings."

"Yes." She grinned.

"I'll see that you get those. In the meantime, I'd like to have a word with your sister." He turned to Margaret. "Coffee in the cafeteria?"

"Fine with me," Margaret said, standing.

As they started out of the room, Lynda called, "And a milkshake! Chocolate!"

Dr. Plummer turned back. "A steak sandwich, onion rings, and a chocolate milkshake."

She nodded.

Once in the corridor, Dr. Plummer looked around until he spotted a candy striper. He stopped her as she walked by, removed a twenty dollar bill from his pocket and handed it to her.

“Go down to Bart’s,” he said. “Know where that is? It’s just on the next block.” He removed a small note pad from his pocket and began to scribble on it. “I want you to get a steak sandwich, onion rings and a chocolate milkshake — ” He continued to write on the pad. “ — for this patient. I’ll put it on her chart.”

Mary, the Irish nurse, overheard as she walked by them outside of Lynda’s room. She slowed down long enough to shake her head and said, “Jesus, Mary and Joseph, you’re gonna need a whole crew to clean up that room when she finishes that!” She didn’t wait for a response, just kept walking.

Dr. Plummer ripped the page from the notebook and handed it to the candy striper. “Can you do that?”

“Sure,” she said, nodding.

“Thank you.” He took Margaret’s elbow and led her down the corridor, leaving the candy striper behind as they headed for the elevator and the cafeteria . . .

14

“I’m not quite sure what to tell you about your sister,” Dr. Plummer said as they seated themselves at a table in the cafeteria. Each of them had a steaming cup of coffee.

“What do you mean? I thought you just said her MRI was very encouraging.”

“Well, that’s what I told her.”

Margaret felt an instant surge of anger burn its way up from her stomach to the back of her throat. “You mean that you told her it was encouraging when it *wasn’t*?” Her hands, flanking the cup of coffee on the table, clenched into fists as she spoke with quiet rage, leaning sharply toward the doctor. “What the hell kind of doctor *are* you, anyway? To tell a cancer patient something like that when you know damned well — ”

Dr. Plummer held up a hand, palm out, and said, “That’s not what I did at all. I just didn’t know what to tell her about the test results when . . . I didn’t understand them myself.”

Margaret's anger dissolved slowly into annoyance, as did her expression, and her hands relaxed on the table. "You know, when I first saw you last night, I thought you were young. But I assumed you'd at least finished medical school."

He lowered his head and shook it slowly, smiling. "Look, Mrs., Um — "

"Margaret's fine. And I'm not a missus."

"Okay, look, Margaret. Your sister's cancer is, uh . . . well, it's gone. I don't know how else to say it. It's just not there anymore."

Margaret relaxed even more, placing a palm over her mouth to hide her quivering, uncontrollable grin. She swallowed several times and willed her tears back.

"Did you say . . . it's gone? The cancer? Really?" She spoke softly and haltingly into her hand.

Dr. Plummer sighed and sipped his coffee. "When I walked into that room yesterday and saw her, I couldn't . . . well, I thought maybe I'd missed too much sleep, or walked into the wrong room. The way she moved and sat up and . . . well, the fact that she moved at all . . . How long have you been here, Margaret? I mean, do you live around here, or did you travel? I didn't even know Lynda had a sister."

Margaret took a few deep breaths, trying to pull herself together quickly. She had that giddy feeling again. There was a fluttering in her chest that made her want to burst into giggles, to stand up, throw herself across the table and hug the doctor. But she fought it.

"I came from Los Angeles," she said, lowering her hand. "I got here day before yesterday. Lynda probably didn't mention me because . . . well, we haven't spoken for a while. Like about twenty years."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that. What brought you to Arizona after all that time?"

"The fact that she was dying. My aunt told me. Our parents are both gone and we have no family."

"What about your aunt?"

"My aunt may be related to us, but she's this hulking, three-hundred pound creature with a telephone receiver growing out of the side of her head who's always been too busy gossiping to ever behave like family. Lynda's the only real family I've got. And vice versa. That's why I came. I figured it was more important than . . . hurt feelings and past disputes."

"Well, if you just got here day before yesterday, then you really haven't seen Lynda at her worst. She's been in the final stages. In fact, I was considering sending her home because I'd done all I could. She hasn't eaten in some time. She could hardly move, couldn't do anything for herself because she was so weak. And she's been bald, too. Now her hair is growing back, and like I said last night, hair simply does not grow back while chemo is still being administered. This . . . recovery, or whatever it is, has happened suddenly. Almost overnight. For all I know, maybe your arrival helped, but . . ." He shrugged. "I just don't understand it."

"Is she in remission?"

"No, no, it's not remission. That takes time. First, the cancer stabilizes, it reaches a plateau. It just sort of . . . stops spreading. Then, over a period of time, it begins to diminish. But *only* over a period of time. A week, two weeks, three weeks, depending on the cancer, on the patient." He sipped his coffee again. "It does not, however, simply . . . disappear. But for reasons I not only don't understand but am not sure I even *believe*," he chuckled nervously, shaking his head, "your sister's cancer has vanished."

Margaret emptied a packet of artificial sweetener into her non-dairy lightened coffee and stirred slowly. "Have you ever seen something like this before?" she asked, still trying to fight those giggles back, those delighted, childish, giddy giggles. She sipped her coffee.

"Well, something like this is really quite impossible, so it goes without saying that I've never seen it before. I just don't understand why — "

Margaret suddenly sprayed coffee as her giggles finally burst out into her cup.

"You okay?" Dr. Plummer asked her as she lowered her cup and grabbed a napkin from the dispenser on the table.

Margaret wiped her lips, still giggling.

"Is something wrong? Are you all right?"

She couldn't stop giggling.

"Margaret?"

She alternated between giggling and coughing for a moment, then asked, "You mean, what's happened to my sister has never happened before?" She pressed a fist over her mouth to stifle any further giggles.

"Not to my knowledge. In fact, just a few minutes ago, I consulted another doctor, one of my colleagues, another oncologist. I described the situation to him, the whole thing, and . . . he laughed at me. He was eating a candy bar, and he walked away, just laughing and chewing. Didn't say a word. I'm either going to be the laughing stock of the medical profession or my name, as well as your sister's, will be on the lips of medical students long after I'm dead. I'm not sure which. What do you think, Margaret?"

"What do *I* think?" she asked with an escaped giggle. "I'm in advertising, not medicine."

"Yes, that may be. But I can't help wondering . . ."

She was still smiling, but her giggling fit had passed for the time being. "Wondering? Wondering what?"

"Well, um . . ." He leaned back in his plastic orange chair and ran a finger-splayed hand through his hair as he sighed. "You know, when I was in medical school, it was just a given that every single professor, every one of those old graybearded doctors, had a Twilight Zone story to tell. That's what we called them. Twilight Zone stories."

"And exactly what were these Twilight Zone stories?"

He reached over to the bowl of cellophane wrapped crackers in the center of the table, tore one open and took a bite, chewing rapidly, like a squirrel.

"I had this one old doctor who told us — the class, I mean — about a guy who not only had advanced cancer of the liver, but also a gangrenous leg. He lived in the hills in an old cabin and had never had so much as a physical exam when this doctor got a hold of him. So, the guy's not only going to lose his leg, he's going to die. He goes to an evangelical revival. You know, one of those tent things? The preacher claimed to be a healer. Now, the next time the doctor sees this guy, the gangrene's gone . . . and so is the cancer. Both of them, just gone. The doctor freaks and asks the guy what happened. When he tells the doctor about the preacher, the doctor immediately tries to reach this healer. But he's already left town, and nobody knows where he's going next. He never found the preacher, and he never understood how that hillbilly was cured so suddenly when he was not only going to lose a leg, but die soon as well. So. What do you make of that, Margaret?"

"You're right. Sounds like a *Twilight Zone* episode. But what's it got to do with Lynda's cancer?"

"All I'm saying is that there are a lot of things out there that the most accomplished doctors don't understand. Some of them deny those things, or just ignore them. Others want to satisfy their curiosity. That's me. I'm curious."

He sat there, silently chewing another bite of his cracker, staring at her. His eyes remained on hers, and he waited . . . for something.

The giggles returned. They came out of her like bubbles, even though she pressed her hand over her mouth tightly.

"I'm sorry, please just — " She tried to bury the giggles with forced coughs, " — just excuse me, I haven't slept much and I'm — " The coughs began to overcome the giggles, and she was finally able to speak clearly again. " — I'm just feeling a little goofy from traveling and not sleeping, that's all."

A few stray giggles found their way out, but she pressed her lips together tightly and forced them out her nose, muffling them.

He didn't move for a long moment, just watched her, studied her, almost if Margaret were a patient. Then he leaned forward and folded his arms on the table.

"Are you sure that's all it is?" he asked quietly. "I mean, could there be something about Lynda . . . something from her past, her childhood, maybe . . . that I don't know about? Something you could share with me?"

"Well, let's see." She belched up a few more renegade giggles. "I can tell you that, when she was a kid, Lynda was a cruel bitch. But we've decided to put that behind us now. Don't you think that's good?"

"Yes, I think that's wise. But what I was referring to was something a little more, how should I put this? Um . . . something about your sister that you might have kept . . . secret?" He looked embarrassed as he spoke.

She let a few more giggles slip by before saying, "You mean all those bodies she'd buried in the basement's dirt floor?" Then she laughed loudly, bowing her head and covering her mouth again as her shoulders quaked silently.

"Are you sure you're all right, Margaret?"

She nodded without looking up. Then, she lifted her head slowly, in control again, and said, "Dr. Plummer, I don't know what you're talking about. There's nothing weird about my sister, if that's what you're asking. She's never been psychic or telekinetic. She got through her

entire senior prom without killing a single person with her mind, as far as I know."

"Then maybe I'm asking about the wrong person."

"What do you mean?"

"You seem to be doing an awful lot of giggling."

"Yeah, well — " She shrugged one shoulder. "I'm a giggler."

Dr. Plummer leaned forward a little further, locking his fingers together beneath his chest. He smiled at her and said very quietly. "Maybe there's something you'd like to tell me, Margaret?"

She stared at him for a long moment, no longer feeling the urge to giggle or laugh. She realized then that she wanted to tell somebody. But she couldn't believe that her story would be met with anything besides laughter.

Almost as if reading her mind, Dr. Plummer said, "I've already told you how curious I am. Something has happened to your sister that is so far beyond explanation . . . well, I didn't even see its dust. So, now that you know I'm open-minded and willing to listen . . . is there something you'd like to me?"

She adjusted her position in the chair, sipped her coffee, patted her hair, rubbed an eye with a knuckle, all nervous gestures to buy time as she mustered her courage. Finally, she said, "Yes, actually there is something I'd like to tell you. As long as you promise me that, once you hear my story, you won't try to have me put in some ward in the bowels of the hospital with lots of locks on the doors and bars on the windows."

He laughed, leaning back a little. "Not at all. We don't even have bowels in this hospital. I promise you that — "

Dr. Plummer beeped three times, sharply.

"Damn," he muttered, leaning back in his chair and reaching under his white coat. When he pulled his hand out, it held a small black beeper, which spoke to him in a pinched female voice: "*Dr. Plummer — 4-East, room four-fourteen, stat. 4-East, room four fourteen stat.*"

He stood quickly, replacing the beeper beneath his white coat as he said, "I'm very sorry. I've got to go. I'll be able to find you in Lynda's room, right?"

"Yes."

"Good. I want to finish this conversation. I want to hear your story."

He turned and rushed out of the cafeteria.

Left alone at the table, Margaret sipped her coffee, giggled a few more times, then went to the vending machines to see what they had to offer.

If Lynda could get through that steak sandwich, then she'd be hungry again, and Margaret wanted to make sure there were plenty of goodies available . . .

15

"So, does he have the hots for you, or what?" Lynda asked. She was lying back on the upright bed, her knees drawn up, watching television. On the far side of the bed, on a rectangular wheeled table, was a crumpled, grease-stained bag, several wadded napkins, and an empty plastic cup with a straw sticking out of the lid.

Margaret walked into the room with an armload of junk food. "He just wanted to talk, so you can stop any match-making you had in mind right now."

"What's all that stuff?"

"Well . . . how was the steak sandwich?" She dumped everything onto the bed table.

"It was absolutely *delicious!*" Lynda said with a small growl of pleasure in her voice. "I loved it! And you know what? Nobody's gonna believe this, especially Dr. Turner, but . . . I'm still hungry."

"For what?"

"I don't know. Something . . . sweet."

Margaret began to look through the pile of stuff she'd brought with her. "Something sweet, huh? Well, I've got M&M's, a Milky Way, a Hershey bar and a Nestle's Crunch."

Lynda grinned. "You did that for me?"

"Sure. I figured if you were hungry, I'd be heading down to the cafeteria sooner or later, anyway."

"Hershey bar! Gimme, gimme!"

Lynda tore the wrapping from the bar.

Margaret had been thinking all the way back up to 4-East. Dr. Plummer had said that the cancer was gone. But did that mean it would *stay* gone? Not necessarily. She was determined to maintain as much physical contact with Lynda as possible until she was certain that the threat of death had passed.

"Aside from the candy," Margaret said, "I brought two sub sandwiches, two bags of chips, two bagels with cream cheese and two Hostess fruit pies. All from cafeteria vending machines, so don't expect a whole lot. You have no idea how people stared at me on the way back up here, my arms loaded with loose junk food and candy, like I was trying to find a place to sit down and binge, or something."

"Sub sandwiches?" she asked after biting into the candy bar. "You brought sub sandwiches? Oh, you're a Godsend! And potato chips? I can't tell you how happy you've made me."

"There's just one thing. Before you get any of this other stuff, you have to agree to something."

Lynda looked at Margaret through narrow eyes as she chewed slowly. "Are we going to be holding hands some more?"

"That's right."

"I'll make you a deal," Lynda said with a smile. "We'll hold hands if you promise you'll go to Daphne's this afternoon and get a knock-out dress for the reunion."

Margaret laughed and said, "You still want me to go to that damned thing?"

"If you don't, I'll be pissed. You've got a lot to show off. If I could go with you, I would, just to watch the reactions. So, do we have a deal?"

"Deal."

"You'll leave one hand free, won't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"So I can *eat*, whatta you *think*!"

Laughing, Margaret wrapped her right hand around Lynda's left hand and nodded . . .

16

Dr. Plummer came into the room, hurried and distracted, as Lynda and Margaret clumsily lunched on cellophane-wrapped sub sandwiches with one hand, still holding hands with the other. He stayed only long enough to ask Lynda how she was feeling ("As if I have to ask," he'd added), and to tell Margaret he'd try to see her later in the day. He reduced the drip on Lynda's I.V., made a note on her chart, and told her she'd be rid of the needle and bag by that night if she still

felt this good. On his way out of the room, Dr. Plummer stopped and looked at their locked hands. He glanced at Margaret briefly, curiously, then left.

As she'd promised, Margaret went into town that afternoon to buy a dress. She felt reluctant to leave Lynda, to let go of her hand, but she'd promised. Margaret decided she simply would not take very long so she could get back to Lynda's bedside as soon as possible.

In Daphne's, the store Lynda had recommended, Margaret was surprised to find how much she enjoyed trying on one outfit after another. More importantly, she was surprised by how much she enjoyed looking at herself in the mirror. While trying on the first dress, she was so stunned by her reflection that she couldn't move from where she stood. She just stared silently at her reflection, wondering when she'd last looked so good . . . wondering if she'd *ever* looked so good.

"Is something wrong?" the young woman who'd been waiting on her asked as she came to Margaret's side.

Without taking her frowning eyes from the mirror, Margaret asked haltingly, "How old . . . do you think I am?"

"What?"

"My age . . . how old would you guess I am? And please, be honest."

"Soon as you walked in the door, I figured you were about my age. I was happy to see you, too. You have no idea how many pasty-faced, aging housewives we get in here, trying to dress younger than they —"

"How old are you?"

"I'll be thirty next month."

Resisting the urge to hug the young woman, Margaret tried on more dresses, finally settling for a tight red-velvet strapless sheath that stopped two inches above her knees.

When she returned to the hospital, Margaret found her sister sitting up in a chair by the window, watching the television intently as she methodically popped one M&M after another into her mouth. She was no longer wearing a bandanna on her head, and her hair, while very short, actually looked thicker than when Margaret had seen it the night before. Lynda smiled when Margaret walked in with her package.

"Can you believe this?" Lynda asked snidely, nodding toward the television. "To keep her marriage together, this idiot woman on

Geraldo finds other women for her husband to have sex with, because he says she's too fat. She even lets him sleep with her own sister! And *I'm* the one in the hospital? Even *Geraldo* couldn't afford to provide her with the amount of therapy she needs. So, what did you find?"

"Oh, a nice red dress."

"Not *too* nice, I hope. I intended for you to find something provocative, something a little naughty."

"Well, maybe it is."

"Put it on, put it on! I insist!"

"I left it hanging in the car. You'll see it tomorrow, before I go to the reunion."

"You're no fun."

"You're stuck in a hospital and you say *I'm* no fun?" She sat in what she'd come to think of as "her chair" and reached over the side rail, which had been lowered, and patted the mattress with her palm. "Now, why don't you come over here and lie down, and we'll — "

Lynda rolled her eyes as she interrupted, "Don't tell me we're holding hands again? Margaret, my fingers are stiff from holding hands. And my curiosity is up because you keep insisting." She rose from her chair and got onto the bed, facing Margaret as she propped herself up on one elbow.

As Lynda looked at her very seriously, with just a hint of wrinkles in her forehead, Margaret was pleased to see how very good her face looked, how vibrant her eyes, how colored and healthy her skin.

"There's something weird about this, Margaret," Lynda said in a near-whisper. "I've been thinking about it a lot today."

"What are you talking about?" Margaret asked, smiling, as that giddy feeling rose in her chest again.

"I'm talking about the fact that, before you got here, I didn't have very long to live at all. I knew it, my doctor knew it and everybody who got one look at me knew it. I was nothing more than a corpse that hadn't stopped talking yet. Now . . . after you've been here a few days . . . after you've insisted that we hold hands . . . my hair's growing back . . . my pain is gone . . . I can sleep without all those horrible nightmares from the chemo . . . and I can eat like a horse without puking my guts up. And my doctor looks at me like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a semi. What's going on? What have you done? *How* have you done it?"

Margaret leaned back away from Lynda with a sigh, thinking. She couldn't tell her everything, not yet. If she did, Lynda might think she was having some kind of breakdown and she might not want her around.

Finally, after a long, silent period of thought, Margaret smiled and said, "Look, if my coming here has helped you to recover — and Dr. Plummer says that's very possible — then I can't tell you how glad I am that I came. If . . . well, if the idea of being close, holding hands, bothers you . . . I mean, sometimes that's the best medicine in the world, you know? Being with a loved one? And we haven't seen each other in about twenty years, so maybe . . . I don't know, Lynda, I just wanted to touch you, that's all. Twenty years is a lot of lost time to make up. If you don't like it, then — "

"Oh, Margaret, I'll hold hands!" Lynda said suddenly, her words spoken in a gassy breath. Unspilled tears glistened in her eyes. "I don't mind at all. I just couldn't understand why I would suddenly improve and . . . get better so fast and . . ."

"Who cares why?" Margaret asked, taking Lynda's hand.

"Yeah, that's right," Lynda said with a stuttering laugh as she dabbed her eyes with a knuckle. "Who cares why? And Margaret . . . what you just said . . ." Her voice lowered to a quivering whisper. ". . . I can't tell you how much that means to me. I could *never* tell you how much."

They both smiled and squeezed one another's hand.

I'll tell her the whole story once they're convinced she's completely cured and they let her out of this hospital, Margaret thought. I'll hold her hand today until I leave, then I'll do it again tomorrow, and for however long it takes, until she gets out of the hospital I'll tell her everything then . . .

17

Margaret awoke in her motel room early the next morning feeling chipper and alert. That alone was enough to startle her, but to add to it, she found herself getting out of bed immediately without even reaching for the snooze button and walking into the bathroom as if she'd been awake for an hour or more.

"Hello, gorgeous," she said to her reflection with a grin.

She showered, shaved her legs and underarms, humming the whole time. Though she tried to tell herself otherwise, she was nervous. In twelve hours, give or take, she would be confronting the very people who had made her youth — those years that adults are always saying are the best years of your life — such a nightmare. As she went about her business in the motel room, she thought many times that perhaps it wasn't such a good idea to go after all. Even though she looked like a million bucks and would no doubt turn a lot of heads, how could she possibly have a good time with all those ugly black memories swirling around her like menacing ghosts. But she'd promised Lynda.

She put her new dress into a garment bag, picked out some jewelry and makeup and put them in her vanity case, and took it all with her to the hospital . . .

18

When Margaret arrived, Lynda's I.V. pole was gone and she was sitting up in a chair eating a breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon, home-fried potatoes, half a grapefruit, coffee and a tall glass of orange juice. She ate as voraciously as a trucker in a roadside diner who was three hours behind schedule, and when she talked, it was usually while she was chewing food.

It was a wonderful sight, and this time, Margaret did not hold back; she let her laughter flow freely. She hung her garment bag in the closet and put her vanity case in the bathroom.

They spent the morning talking about the upcoming reunion, and Lynda gave her specific instructions.

"Whenever you sit down, make sure they can see your legs," she said. "And when you dance — are they having a dance? They are? Okay, then make sure you dance nice and close to all those gone-to-seed quarterbacks and basketball players while their wives are watching. You might not get to see the results, but I guarantee you those pot-bellied has-beens will when they leave. They'll hear about it all the way home and long into the night."

Then Lynda laughed so loudly and raucously that Mary stepped into the room and said, "This is still a hospital, y'know, lass. You might be wantin' to show a little consideration for those patients who aren't medical miracles." Mary winked before disappearing out the door again. "I

don't know," Margaret said quietly. "I think I'll just show up, have a couple drinks, say hi to people, make small talk, have dinner and go."

"Yeah, maybe you're right. As Oscar Wilde said, 'revenge is a dish best served cold.' Or was that Captain Kirk?"

"No, it wasn't Kirk. I think it was Ricardo Montalban in *Star Trek*."

"Whoever. Walk softly and carry a great bod."

Margaret had not been able to continue her conversation with Dr. Plummer, although the doctor had paid a late visit to Lynda the night before. When Lynda requested a walk outside, Dr. Plummer had approved enthusiastically, with the stipulations that a nurse would have to accompany her with a wheelchair in case she needed it, and as long as Lynda stayed out of the hot Arizona sun.

So, before lunch, Lynda and Margaret went into the courtyard outside the hospital, holding hands.

It was a spacious diamond-shaped area of concrete and fine gravel, bordered by shrubbery and colorful violas. In the center and around the edges were several wooden benches flanked by large concrete ash-trays and garbage receptacles. Mary followed behind slowly with a wheelchair.

The instant she stepped into the sun, Lynda moaned with almost sexual pleasure, closed her eyes and turned her smiling face up toward the sky.

"Oh, that feels so good, so *good!*" she said, squeezing Margaret's hand so hard that it hurt. Behind them, Mary said, "It won't be feelin' so good when you pass out and crack your skull on that concrete, now, will it? Doctor said you weren't to be in the sun."

"But Mary, it's so warm and — "

"Stick to the shade or I'll be kickin' your miracle ass up around your miracle shoulders!"

Laughing, Lynda did as she was told. They stayed in the shade, walking slowly around the edges of the courtyard.

"Lynda, why am I the only visitor you've had since I got here?" Margaret asked.

"You're the only visitor I've had since I got here."

"Well, maybe the family's gone, but surely you've got friends."

"Not really. Being married . . . well, it was one of those marriages where his friends were my friends, and my friends were neglected. He didn't like them."

"None of them?"

"He was very jealous. He didn't want me hanging around with anyone with whom I had a history. So I neglected my friendships, alienated my friends, and before I knew it, the only friends I had were his."

"Okay, so where are they? I mean, maybe he's enough of a prick not to come see you, but what about the friends you made through him?"

Lynda chuckled coolly. "When we divorced, I got the house and one of the cars. He got all the friends. I would've gotten the dog, too, but he died."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. My old friends have good reason to stay away because I treated them like shit to please my asshole husband. As for my asshole husband's friends . . . they're assholes, too, so where's the loss in that? In fact, I'd pretty much resigned myself to the fact that I was going to slip away without any visitors, which was fine with me, because I didn't want anyone to see me looking like a corpse. But that was before you came."

They walked slowly around the courtyard and finally sat on a bench for a while, still in the shade, talking and laughing as Mary waited with the wheelchair, looking more and more impatient. Finally the nurse said, "Contrary to what you might be thinkin', I've got a whole job to be doin' four floors up on the inside of this buildin'."

"Oh, Mary, you're such a grouch," Lynda said with a grin.

They went back to Lynda's room, but she did not get into bed. She paced the room for a few minutes, then, at Margaret's urging, sat in a chair beside Margaret and held her hand.

Lynda's lunch was unidentifiable at first, but turned out to be quiche.

"I hate quiche!" Lynda called as Mary left the room after delivering the tray.

Mary spun around. "What're you wantin' me to do about it? Call out for a pizza for all I care! Jesus, Mary and Joseph, you shouldn't even be on this unit! They oughta send y'home or give you a job! God knows you're a pain in the ass as a patient!" Then she hurried away.

"That's not a bad idea!" Lynda said in a conspiratorial whisper. "Grab the phonebook in that drawer! We're gonna have a pizza with the works."

By the time the pimply-faced delivery boy got to Lynda's room with the large pizza, he'd gone through several nurses, including Mary, who had apparently given him quite a hard time. The boy looked terrified. He was even cautious about taking Margaret's check. Lynda gave him a ten dollar tip for his trouble, but he didn't even look pleased; he simply looked relieved that he could go. Once he was outside the door of the room, his sneakered footsteps broke into a quickly pattering jog.

As they ate their pizza, which had everything on it, including anchovies, heads continued to pop in the door curiously, following the smell.

They laughed and talked as they ate, and watched the shopping channel. They behaved as if they were at a party to which all the other guests had forgotten to come.

And, of course, they held hands . . .

19

Around five o'clock, Lynda joined Margaret in the bathroom, insisting that she help her get ready for the reunion. Like two little girls playing dress-up at their mother's vanity, they giggled and fussed and agreed and disagreed about the fine points of hairstyle and makeup. Before she was dressed, though, Margaret insisted that Lynda leave. She wanted to present herself to Lynda fully dressed, give her the full effect and get her honest reaction.

Margaret finally walked out of the bathroom in her red velvet sheath, with smooth bare legs, two-inch black suede heels and a short strand of real pearls around her neck. In her right hand, she held a black velvet clutch purse.

Lynda, who was seated in her chair watching television, gasped. It was a long deep-throated gasp of genuine amazement. Margaret spun around once in front of her, smiling, and asked, "What do you think?"

"My God, Margaret, if I were a man I'd have a pup tent in my lap right now!"

"You think so? I tried on nearly every dress in the store, but I — "

"Oh, you made the right choice, trust me. You're *gorgeous!* You look like some femme fatale, like . . . like Michael Douglas should be humping you up against a kitchen sink on the big screen."

"Oh, *stop* it, for God's sake! You're supposed to compliment me, not disgust me!"

"I didn't mean to. But I meant that you look like you should be on the big screen. I'm not kidding. You're beautiful."

Margaret saw the tears glistening on Lynda's cheeks as she stared up at Margaret with an expression of awe.

"All those years I told you that you were fat . . . and ugly . . . all those years I made you feel so horrible about yourself. Who would've thought . . ."

"Oh, come on, Lynda, don't cry. Please."

Margaret went to her, leaned down to embrace her, but Lynda put her hands on Margaret's shoulders and held her back.

"Don't mess yourself up," Lynda whispered. "I'm fine. I'm just feeling . . . some much deserved . . . pain and regret. Stand up. Straight. Don't you dare mess that dress. I'll kill you if you do."

Margaret stood up straight, but reached down and placed a hand on her sister's cheek, smiling.

Lynda said in a breath, "I was never . . . ever . . . as beautiful as you are right now."

"That's the highest compliment I could ever receive," Margaret said. "'Cause you are one hell of a dish."

"You're not wearing underwear, are you?"

"What?" Margaret pulled her hand away and blushed. She wasn't.

Lynda grinned. "You're not! But that's good! No lines, nothing, just that wonderfully smooth and curving figure."

"Well, that's why I'm not. I tried, but . . . it didn't look right."

"Of course it didn't. And you can get away with it. I'm telling you, Margaret . . . tonight, you are a sex goddess. Tonight, you're going to get all the lusty attention and adoration that Marilyn Monroe got for years. So sit back and enjoy every second of it, will you? For me? Please?"

Lynda reached out a hand and Margaret took it. Then Margaret reached down for the other hand, so that she was holding both of them.

"If you want me to be a sex goddess," Margaret said, "I will. I'll even sign autographs if anyone asks."

They both laughed.

Lynda stood and they embraced — “*Careful, careful,*” Lynda said, “*we don’t want to muss you.*” — for a long moment, Margaret rubbing her hands slowly over Lynda’s back.

“I’ll come back here afterward,” Margaret said when they separated.

“Visiting hours end at eight o’clock,” Lynda said. “If anyone tries to stop you, feel free to beat the living shit out of them.”

“I promise.” Margaret said, laughing . . .

20

The reunion was being held at the Royal House Hotel. It was the closest Harlie could come to posh. That was not to say it was not a very nice place. In fact, it seemed that the hotel was so conscious of being in a small town that it almost went overboard in trying to make up for it.

A uniformed doorman greeted Margaret and held the door open for her, nodding with a smile as she went inside.

In the lobby, to the right of the entrance, a long table had been set up with two nicely-dressed women sitting behind it. Margaret almost walked by it, until she saw the sign identifying it as REGISTRATION. Then she saw the nametag worn by one of the women behind the table.

HI! I’M AMELIA, the tag read. Amelia Turner, formerly half of The Couple at school, the much-lusted after girl who had taken every opportunity to publicly humiliate Margaret with the help of her quarterback boyfriend, Daryl Cotch. She wasn’t immediately recognizable, though. There was more of her than there used to be. She wasn’t fat, but she had thickened to the point of shapelessness. She looked sturdy, hard . . . but like a tree trunk rather than an athlete. Large glasses rested on her nose. She wore a blue paisley outfit and her blond hair was short and wavy above her thick neck.

The woman beside her didn’t look at all familiar and wasn’t wearing a nametag.

Margaret approached the table, smiling.

“I’d like to register for the reunion,” she said.

Amelia looked up at her pleasantly and slid a nametag and felt marker across the table to Margaret. Her eyes became puzzled even before she spoke. "Well, now, you don't look familiar."

Still smiling, Margaret simply leaned forward and printed her name slowly and precisely on the tag. As she did that, Amelia slid the open registration book over the table toward her. Margaret peeled the tag from its backing, stood up straight and pressed it gently to the top of her dress, just over her left breast. Without giving Amelia a chance to read the tag, Margaret plucked the pen from her hand, signed her name in the book, leaving the address and phone number spaces blank, then handed the pen back.

Amelia's eyes squinted a little through her glasses as she leaned forward, reading the nametag as she handed over a program booklet.

"Margaret?" she said. Her eyes quickly looked Margaret over from top to bottom. "Well, now, I can't say that I remember a Margaret." She turned the registry around and read the name. Her head snapped up, eyes wide. Her chin dropped as the pen slipped from her fingers and clattered to the table. "Fuller?" she whispered in unconcealed amazement. Then, louder: "Margaret Fuller?"

Margaret smiled again. "See you at the dinner, Amelia," she said as she turned and walked away.

Behind her, she could hear Amelia talking to the other woman behind the table, her voice starting in a whisper, then rising in a high, befuddled yammer, only to plunge again to a hissing whisper.

Margaret couldn't have stopped smiling then if she'd wanted to. She felt somehow taller than when she'd first entered the hotel.

She rounded a corner so she'd be out of sight of Amelia, took a seat on a maroon velvet loveseat beside a drinking fountain, put her purse in her lap and began thumbing through the program. The schedule began with cocktails in the King's Lounge; that had started twenty minutes ago. After that, a "Reacquaintance Party" in something called the Queen's Parlor — Margaret thought, *Sounds like a gay bar in the Old South* — where group and individual photos would be taken. Then, dinner and dancing in the Royal Banquet Hall.

The program booklet was scattered with pictures from old yearbooks: people mugging for the camera, couples caught unawares as they kissed behind the cafeteria, a group of boys throwing one of their

own into the pool. Each picture had a caption beneath it, a one-liner that was meant to be clever but came off as tepid.

And then she saw one picture that made her smile fade away and made her stomach twist into a knot.

Margaret looked at herself. Her round face and double chin (with a bright, swollen pimple on the top one) filled the upper right corner of one page. Strings of melted cheese dangled from her mouth to the slice of pizza she'd just bitten into. The caption read, "Dieting to fit into that prom dress!"

Sucking both lips between her teeth, Margaret felt her breath coming in short, staccato bursts, and she knew if she didn't stop that right away, she would hyperventilate. She also felt the back of her throat burn with tears, which she *refused* to let out because she didn't want to spoil her makeup.

Her hands began to tremble as they held the booklet, then shake . . . and then they closed into fists, crumpling the program booklet between them until it was wadded into a ball.

A bathroom. She needed to find a bathroom. She'd get hold of herself, then she'd join the festivities.

As she stood, leaving the crumpled booklet on the loveseat behind her, she muttered under her breath, "Show them what a real fucking diet is . . ."

21

By the time Margaret walked into the King's Lounge, the cocktail party was well under way. The second she passed through the long, dark entryway into the lounge, she saw a crowd of laughing, talking people, none of them identifiable in the dim, smoke-misted light, but most of them wearing the big, obnoxious nametags on their lapels, shoulders and breast pockets.

At the far end of the lounge, in a corner, a jazz quartet played quietly, barely audible above the din of voices.

As her eyes adjusted to the murky light, Margaret began to look at the laughing, talking, drinking faces around her, moving slowly through the lounge. She went to the bar, got a Bloody Mary, then ambled into the crowd, mingling silently, looking, watching, listening to snatches of conversation.

From behind, Margaret heard a guffawing laugh, and someone slammed into her back. Her Bloody Mary slipped from her hand and splattered over the carpet at her feet.

"Oh, jeez, I'm sorry," a man said.

She turned to him. He carried a drink in his right hand, and he was enormous, tall with big rounded shoulders, with an enormous belly that his ill-fitting dark suit could not conceal. His face was bloated, red and sweaty; puffy, wrinkled bags formed half-moons beneath his eyes and his hair was slicked back, though it was hard to tell if it was slicked with mousse or perspiration.

When they were facing one another, the man's eyes moved first over her face, then over her body. "Hey, I'm really sorry." He glanced down at the spilled drink. "I'll buy you another one, whatta y'say."

He'd already had plenty, that was clear. In fact, as he grinned at her, he swayed ever so slightly back and forth. She glanced at his nametag.

HI! I'M DARYL C.

Apparently, his bleary eyes had not yet taken a look at her nametag.

Tucking her purse beneath her left arm, Margaret smiled and said, "I'd like that, thank you."

"Well, c'mon, then, honey," he said, taking her elbow in his left hand, a bit too firmly, and leading her through the crowd toward the bar.

On the way, she remembered the things he'd said, the things he'd done . . . in hallways . . . on the steps in front of the school . . . in the gym . . . at dances . . . always with Amelia, the two of them, laughing at her, teasing her, humiliating her . . .

But she's just so gorgeous, Amelia . . . so sexy . . . I can't keep my eyes off her. She's incredible!

"What'll you have, hon?" he asked, setting his drink on the bar and lighting a cigarette.

"Well, that was a Bloody Mary that I dropped back there."

"Then a Bloody Mary you'll have." He pounded a fist on the bar and ordered the drink, then turned back to her. "Hey, are you with the reun — oh, yeah, you gotta nametag. Margaret? Hmph," he grunted, looking her over with a frown, as if someone had just asked him a riddle, his mouth twisted into a wriggly line. "I can't say I remember a Margaret. What's your last name?"

The drink arrived and he paid for it.

Margaret lifted the drink, took a sip and said, "Well, I can't say I remember a Daryl, really . . . Oh, no, I take that back. There was one Daryl. But he was a real hunk. Muscular and handsome. A quarter-back. You're pretty chubby."

His eyes widened and he grinned as he spread his arms as if to embrace her. "Hey, that's me, sweetheart! Daryl Cotch! The one and only!"

She smiled. "Is that right?" she asked, patting his belly with the back of her hand. "What happened, Daryl?"

"Oh, y'know . . . got married, had a few kids. Settlin' down'll do that to ya. But, hey . . . I still got what it takes."

"Is your wife here?"

"Oh, yeah, she's around here somewhere," he muttered with a shrug. "But what about you? I don't remember you, and believe me I'd remember *you!*"

"Come on, Daryl, how many Margarets did you know in high school?" she asked as hatred burned in her gut. She was afraid it would explode and vomit out of her mouth all over Daryl's too-tight suit.

He chuckled, sipped his drink and said, "Well, the only Margaret I knew was this real fat girl who looked like — "

"Margaret Fuller?"

His eyebrows shot up. "Yeah, that's the one! You remember her? God she was — " His face froze as he looked at her, as she smiled at him, as her eyes narrowed.

"Can I bum a cigarette, Daryl?" she asked.

"Uh . . . uh . . . yeah, sure." He fumbled the pack out of his pocket, gave her one and lit it for her. His hand trembled slightly, possibly from drunkenness . . . possibly from recognition. "You wouldn't be Margaret . . . Fuller . . . would you?"

"Yes, Daryl, I would be. I am. How about that, huh?"

"Well, hey, look . . . I didn't mean that, what I said, about you bein' . . . well, you know, back in school, you gotta admit, you *were* pretty hefty. Weren't you? I mean . . . remember?"

He looked embarrassed, like a little boy caught in a lie.

Margaret just continued to smile as she smoked her cigarette, not turning away when she blew smoke from her mouth. Mixed in with those swirls of smoke were tendrils of hatred that would have strangled the fat pig if they'd had any substance to them.

"And you *weren't* pretty hefty, Daryl," she said. "You are now. That's such a shame. You used to be so . . . virile."

"Oh, but hey, I'm still . . ." He stopped, puffed his cigarette and cleared his throat. "I'm tellin' ya, Margaret, you sure don't look the same. You're . . . *gorgeous!*"

"Why, thank you, Daryl."

"Are, um . . . are you married?"

"No. Never been married. Foot loose and fancy free."

"Oh, well . . . um, y'know, Margaret, we've got a lot of time to make up."

She frowned slightly and cocked her head to one aide. "Oh? And what time would that be, Daryl?"

"Well, we never really got to know each other back then," he said, shifting his considerable weight from one foot to the other and back again.

"Do you think that might have been because you spent most of your time tormenting me, Daryl?"

"Oh, well, oh-ho," he blustered, shaking his head and waving his cigarette through the air. He took another sip of his drink. "That was *high school*. That's the kinda thing people *do* in high school, y'know, just foolin' around, just jokin'. Nothin' serious."

"Just joking?" Margaret drawled through her smile.

Daryl took a healthy gulp of his drink this time, then plunked it onto the bar and said, "You didn't take that stuff seriously, did you, Margaret?"

"Take it . . . seriously?"

"Oh, Margaret, c'mon," he said quietly, his voice wet. "That was a long time ago." He leaned toward her, his face close to hers. When he spoke, his lips sprayed bits of moisture onto hers and she was assaulted by the thick smell of whiskey. "Y'know, I may look different now . . . a little heavier, a little older . . . but I'm still the same old Daryl. I've still got the touch."

"You do?"

"Oh, yeah, baby, I do."

"And what touch would that be?"

"Tell you what. Let's go someplace where we can be alone. I came in from Tempe, I gotta room here."

"What about your wife?"

“Oh, she’s wanderin’ around, y’know, havin’ drinks. Don’t worry about her.”

“So, let me get this straight. You want me to go up to your room with you? So we can be alone?”

He grinned and his dizzy eyes widened. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“And for what reason? Sex, maybe? Are you hoping to have sex with me, Daryl?”

“Well . . . if you wanna put it *that* way — ”

She started laughing. Softly, at first, then louder as she shook her head back and forth.

Daryl pulled away from her, his eyes narrowing at first, looking suspicious, then growing big and hurt, like a puppy’s.

Margaret patted her hand on his big, fleshy chest and said, in a casual, friendly way, “Drop dead, you fucking asshole.”

Then she turned and walked away, into the crowd.

She was beginning to get the hang of this reunion, and she was looking forward to getting on with it . . .

22

Someone shrieked with laughter right beside Margaret. It was so loud that she nearly dropped her drink again. She spun around to see the source of the laughter: a rail-thin woman with a helmet of hair nearly bigger than her head. Her nose was thin and sharp — *obviously the work of a surgeon*, Margaret thought — and her eyes looked quite sunken in their sockets. Her large hair was the kind of red that came from a bottle, and not exactly the red that it used to be back in school. Margaret recognized her immediately.

Libby Shore, one of Amelia Turner’s disciples. She’d always complained about her periods back in school, to anyone, male or female, as if she were proud of them, as if her menstrual cycle was a badge of honor she wore proudly. Sometimes she even got out of classes because of them. “My periods are epic,” she’d often said. “They’re long and sweeping, and they usually sweep me off my feet.”

She was talking with two other women. The man standing beside her was quite tall and as thin as she. His head, topped by thinning, graying hair, was bowed slightly, and his shoulders were slumped. He

almost looked ashamed, staring at his shuffling feet, as if he had just been caught doing something nasty.

Margaret turned to the group, standing on the fringe, watching and listening as she looked at the other two women. One of the women, with brown, gray-streaked hair, was short and fat. Her body seemed to be made up of rolls that circled her in succession. Her legs stuck out of her skirt like posts. She held a mug of beer. The other woman was taller, much thinner, and her hair had gone silver. Her face nearly matched her hair in color, and beneath her eyes, the sallow was quite saggy, especially her cheeks, which seemed to hang slightly below the line of her jaw as if in defeat. They held drinks and smiled and laughed with Libby, and Margaret recognized both of them without even seeing their nametags.

The short fat one was Natalie Kramer, and the skinny, jowly one was Vikki Robinson.

Natalie Kramer had once been a short, thin and lovely girl who had looked so much like a walking, talking doll that the guys had flocked to her, had stood tall over her . . . and had pulled her string, so to speak. She'd been so tiny that her friends had joked about her being a doll, a midget, but their jokes had been friendly ones, affectionate ones, and she'd not only eaten these up, she'd used them to her benefit. When she asked people for favors, she would usually follow up the request with a sweet look and the plea, "Now, you wouldn't let down a little doll like me, would you?"

Vikki Robinson, on the other hand, had been tall, with flaming red hair and pale skin, a sharp mind and a tongue to match. The guys had flocked to her, as well, but she had manipulated them like marionettes. She'd *owned* them. No one had joked about Vikki. They'd respected her too much. Everything about her — her stature, her looks, her deep and throaty voice — demanded respect. She still had it, the thin body with all the right curves, and the look in her eyes that demanded respect, in spite of the fact that her cheeks were running off her face and her hair looked like a fright wig.

Margaret positioned herself at the edge of their little klatch and listened as they talked.

"Oh, yeah, I remember that," Natalie said, giggling. "I thought it was cute, what he did. But the faculty, of course, they were so upset. Oh, *boy* were they upset!"

"Well, he mooned everybody, Nattie!" Vikki said with a laugh. "Whatta you expect? He shows his bare ass to everybody and — "

"But it was such a *gorgeous* bare ass!" Natalie said.

Suddenly, all three women burst into laughter, flapping their free hands as they said, "Damned right it was!" and "Mm, it was like pastry!" and "A nice dessert attached to a great meal!"

They continued to laugh

Margaret took one step forward and said, with a smile, "Hi."

Suddenly, all of them — except for the man standing beside Libby, who still looked as if he'd done something wrong — turned to Margaret and said, with high, shrill voices, almost simultaneously, "Oh, *hiiii*, hello there!"

"So, how are you girls doing after all these years?" Margaret asked, holding her drink between both hands, her purse still tucked beneath her left arm.

They looked at her for a moment, their tight smiles intact, their eyes wandering to her nametag.

"Margaret?" Lily asked. "Now, which Margaret are you?"

Margaret's eyebrows rose. "Well, which do you *think*?"

They all laughed.

"Well, there was a Margaret Duarte," Vikki said to the others. "Remember her?"

"Yes," Natalie said. "The Portuguese girl who left after about three months."

"That couldn't be you, could it?" Natalie asked.

"No, that's not me."

Libby frowned and said, "But the only other Margaret was Margaret Fuller, and she was really — " She stopped abruptly as her eyes moved over Margaret's body and her smile faltered, and when she finished her sentence, she did so quietly, " — fat."

Margaret swept her right arm upward, as if she were a game show hostess showing off a washer-dryer combo. "That's me!" she said cheerfully.

All three of them looked as if they'd been suddenly kicked in the back of the head with a steel-toed boot. But that lasted only seconds. They all exchanged glances like secret handshakes, and then turned to her with enormous grins. Natalie rushed forward with her mug of beer and embraced Margaret.

“Oh my *God*, Margaret, honey, you look *wonderful!*” she said with laughter in her voice.

Oh, yeah, I look wonderful now, you bitch, Margaret thought. I hate the fact that you’re touching me, that you’re even this close to me, I hope you shrivel up and die, you cunt, shrivel to the little doll you always thought you were. I hope you shrink to Barbie-size and end up on the shelf of some curio shop, you smug piece of shit.

As Natalie backed away, Libby was right behind her, eager to hug Margaret as she said, “You’re so *beautiful!*”

Oh, yeah, you too, you fucking twat, and I hope the next period you have gushes like a river and you drop dead in the puddle! Let’s see how proud you’ll be of that one, you bitch!

And right after Libby came Vikki, who kissed her on the cheek first, then embraced her and slurred. “You have risen above yourself, unlike so many of us.”

Ooo, a fancy sentence from a Harlie cheerleader, Margaret thought. I hope you lose that figure, you cunt. I hope you blow up like a balloon. Your fucking sagging cheeks, too. I hope you get so fat you explode, you manipulating slut!

“Have you seen Amelia?” Libby asked. “I’m sure she’d be *thrilled* to see you!”

“Oh, yes,” Margaret said, remaining calm in the face of their bloated enthusiasm. “I thrilled her earlier out in the lobby. She was working the registration table.”

“That’s right” Vikki said. “You know, if it hadn’t been for Amelia, this reunion never would have happened.”

Margaret smiled as she said, “I can’t imagine any other person in this *world* who could possibly be responsible for this reunion.”

“You’re staying for the dinner, aren’t you?” Natalie asked.

“Oh, of *course!* Nobody loves to eat more than yours truly!”

“Then you’ve *got* to get together with Amelia,” Libby said. “I’m sure she’d be just *sick* if she couldn’t spend some time with you.”

“Oh, I’ll be looking for her,” Margaret said with a grin. “Don’t you worry. See you girls later.” She lifted a hand and waggled her fingers as she walked away.

Margaret went into the crowd, grinding her teeth together.

Cunts, every Goddamned one of them, she thought. Sluts in high school . . . God knows what they’re like now. Probably even worse.

Once a cunt, always a cunt, I say. I wonder whose husband that poor skinny son of a bitch was.

She suddenly felt the urge to slug down her Bloody Mary. Once she'd finished, she went to the bar and got another. She decided she'd had her fill of the crowd in the King's Lounge. She headed for the doorway as a commotion began to build behind her.

Voices rose together in distress.

A woman screamed.

A man shouted something that was unintelligible as it mixed with the music and voices, but it sounded urgent.

Out in the clean light of the lobby, Margaret pressed her cigarette into the sand of an ashtray.

The next event was the "Reacquaintance Party," which would be taking place in the Queen's Parlor.

She decided to find the Queen's Parlor and wait for the others to show up . . .

23

"I can't tell you how lovely you look, Margaret."

Her smile was broad and warm, but it was genuine this time because it was directed at Marty Cullen.

When she first saw him, not five minutes ago, she'd recognized neither his face, nor the name on his lapel, MARTIN C. He'd seemed just as curious about her nametag, approached her and started a conversation. The next thing she knew, two of the most tormented and unwanted students from Harlie High had found one another.

He was no longer the gangly, clumsy creature he'd been back then. He was still slender, but he filled out his suit nicely in all the right places. And quite an expensive suit it was, too. Italian . . . about two grand, she guessed. His face, which had once looked long and pointy, was now angular; he had perfect cheekbones beneath deep brown eyes surrounded by the thickest lashes she'd ever seen. (*Why, she wondered, do men always get the gorgeous eyelashes?*) His teeth were white and straight, his shoulders broad . . . and, she couldn't help notice, the third finger on his left hand was bare. He still had his Adam's apple, but it was now situated in the middle of a throat that

was surrounded by a neck which had been built up quite well, most likely with aid of weights.

"I mean it," Marty continued. "You put every woman here to shame. And I'm glad, too. You deserve to be so gorgeous."

"You're one to talk," she said. "You look . . ." She shook her head slightly, looking for the right word, not too forward but just enough. ". . . absolutely fantastic. I mean it."

"How about that, huh?" he said. "The two of us? Who'da thunk it, as they say." He was still smiling. A big smile. And his eyes were moving over face, her hair, and spending a lot of time on her eyes. He'd tried to be sly about it, but she'd seen his eyes work their way up and down her body, a bit at a time, trying not to get caught.

"My God, Marty, what's become of you? What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Well, I've been busy. I have my own company now. It started small. Video games. Back when they were a novelty."

"Computer stuff. Of course. You were a genius back in school."

"Well, video games were only the beginning. They're still the meat of the company, of course. They were just in grocery stores and bus stations when we started, but now they're everywhere. But we're doing some work for the Pentagon now — simulators for jets, tanks, ships, subs, you name it. But if you don't mind, I'm bored with it already because I've been doing it for so long. How about you?"

She was telling him about her career in advertising when a short Hispanic woman rushed up to them and said, "Have you gotten your photo forms?"

"Our what?" Marty asked.

"Your photo forms! For the pictures! Your pictures will be put in a souvenir book and you have to tell us what to write beneath them!" She plucked two sheets of paper from a stack cradled in her arm and handed one to Margaret, one to Marty. "We'd prefer that you hand them in before dinner, but by the *end* of dinner at the *very* latest!" Then she hurried away.

They looked at one another and laughed, as if they had just been rushed by a talking squirrel.

"What are you going to put under your picture?" he asked.

"I have no idea. I don't even know if I want my damned picture taken, to tell you the truth."

"So, Margaret, are you married?"

"No, no. Never got married. How about you?"

"Not now. I was. My wife died two years after we married."

"Oh I'm sorry."

"Cancer. It was pretty sudden. But not quick enough for her, I'm afraid. She went through a lot of pain."

"My sister has cancer," Margaret said quietly. Then, suddenly, she corrected herself. "*Had* cancer, I mean."

She thought of Lynda, of her withered, corpse-like form when Margaret had first seen her in the hospital . . . and of the smiling, hungry woman with hair on her head, the woman she'd become since Margaret had arrived . . . since they'd begun holding hands . . .

"I'm sorry to hear that," Marty said. "I hope she's better."

"She is. Much"

"Well, I don't know about you, but I think I know what I'm going to put under my picture."

"Really? What?"

"I thought about it flying in from Washington. I decided I'd wait until I got here, sort of get the feel of our former classmates. The lay of the land, so to speak. Now that I have, I think I'll go with it. 'Very Rich.' How does that sound?"

She laughed and placed a hand on one of his broad shoulders. "*Perfect!*"

"Why don't we go find a couple of chairs and fill out our photo forms?"

They did, laughing and talking the whole time.

"Did you hear somebody from our group had a heart attack in the cocktail lounge?" Marty asked.

"Is that what that was? I heard some commotion. Who was it?"

"I don't know. I thought maybe you did."

"No idea. Did Principal Getz come? Maybe it was him!"

Margaret couldn't decide what she wanted beneath her picture, but Marty suggested "*Skinny, Sexy and Successful.*" She didn't like the idea at first, but he pressed.

"Think of all those horrible things they used to say about you and *to* you," he said, placing his hand over hers "Now you're a successful advertising executive and you look like a movie star. Why not rub it in a little? That's what I'm doing. I'm not about to stoop to their level and

be nasty about it, but I figure they deserve to have it rubbed in just a little. Sort of like a . . . a revenge massage.”

Laughing, she wrote the words down.

“What do you say we stick together tonight, Marty?” she asked. “I think that between the two of us, we can befuddle a lot of very unpleasant people.”

He rose from his chair, took her hand and pulled her up with him, grinning. “I think you’re right.”

Margaret felt a tingle . . . the kind of tingle she hadn’t felt in a long time. In it, there was some of the same giddiness she’d felt when Lynda began to improve. But added to that was the warmth of Marty’s hand in hers, and his smile, and the way his eyes touched her.

It was turning out to be a much more interesting evening than she ever could have anticipated . . .

24

Lynda pressed the call button with her thumb, then lay back on her pillows with both hands resting on her flat stomach. She knew the response would be quick. Her nurse tonight was Derek, a tall and handsome fellow in his thirties who was not only efficient but always eager to make sure her needs were met and she was comfortable. He was friendly and funny and a good enough sport to engage in a little harmless flirting with her now and then, which had somehow put her at ease in her most painful moments.

“What can I do for you, Lynda?” he asked with a smile as he entered the room in his light blue uniform.

“Well, you know, I’ve been feeling so good these last few days . . . but about twenty minutes ago or so, I got really . . . sick to my stomach all of a sudden.”

Derek glanced at the small tan garbage can beside her bed table. It was filled with candy and sandwich wrappers.

“Maybe a little too much junk food?” he asked, arching a brow.

“But I’ve been so hungry lately.”

“I know, and that’s good. But you haven’t been eating for a long time. Your body’s not used to the stuff you’ve been putting into it all of a sudden. Feel like you’re going to vomit?” he asked, reaching into the bed table drawer for the small, beige, kidney-shaped emesis basin.

Lynda propped herself up on an elbow, frowning, and said, "Well, I don't think so, but . . ."

Derek placed the basin on the mattress beside her just as Lynda's body convulsed once and her head shot forward.

She vomited generously and forcefully all over his crisp blue uniform with a flat, thick splashing sound.

Suddenly weakened, Lynda flopped back on the pillows, gasping for breath.

Derek tossed the small, unused basin onto the bed table as his uniform dripped onto the tile floor. He said calmly, "That thing wasn't big enough anyway . . ."

25

Brandon Lyons had not gotten fat and he hadn't gone bald. He looked, in fact, quite the same way he'd looked the last time Margaret had seen him, which had been graduation day. He'd always had an odd handsomeness about him, but it had been marred by a vague slovenliness and frightful fashion sense. His face, still scattered with a few stray freckles from his youth, had a happy glow to it as he approached Margaret with a drink in hand, and his dark brown hair, as it always had, looked mussed.

"Somebody told me you were Margaret Fuller," he said.

Marty was busy talking to a few of the jocks who had spent so much time making his life miserable back in school, and Margaret had gone to bar for another Bloody Mary.

"Well, I guess they told you right," she said, smiling.

He wore a brown sport coat over a blue shirt, with tan slacks and shiny black shoes.

"It's nice to see you again, Margaret," he said.

"Is it?"

"Yeah!" he said enthusiastically, his eyes widening. "How are ya, anyway?"

"I'm just fine, Brandon, and you?"

"Oh, I'm doing pretty well. I've got a small trucking company outta Tucson. And I'm footloose and fancy free."

"What does that mean?"

"That means I'm *single!*"

"You say that as if it might mean something to me."

"Well . . . how about you? Are you married?"

"No. Footloose and fancy free."

"Well, there you go."

"There I go where?"

"Well, you know." He looked her up and down slowly. Spread his arms as if he were about to embrace her, then let them slap to his sides.

"I mean, God, Maggie, you're lookin' . . . *fine!*"

"Why, thank you, Brandon. And I must say that you . . ." She looked him up and down in exactly the same way, pausing a moment to take in a thoughtful breath. ". . . are wearing very shiny shoes." She started to walk away, smiling, with her drink.

"Wait a second, hold it," he said, hurrying to her side. "Where are you living these days?"

"Los Angeles."

"Oh, yeah? Hollywood?"

"No. Los Angeles"

"You work in the movies?"

"No, I work with an advertising firm."

"Really? You make commercials?"

"As far as you know, yes."

"How long will you be in town?"

She frowned slightly, tilting her head. "Why?"

"Well, you know . . . I thought maybe we could get together, you and me. Have dinner?"

"Why would I want to do that, Brandon?"

"Just . . . because." He shrugged and laughed, a little nervously. "You know, it's been a long time. I'd like to get to know you again."

"You never knew me to begin with, Brandon."

"Oh, c'mon, Maggie, we were all friends."

"We were? To which *we* are you referring?"

"Well, I mean . . . *all* of us. You know, we went through a lot together."

"You never went through what I went through, Brandon. We both know that, don't we?"

"Yeah, I guess people made a few jokes about you and — "

"A few jokes?"

"Hey, I know we were kind of nasty sometimes."

She took in a breath to ask another question, to shout it at him this time, but she closed her mouth, stopped herself. She closed her eyes a moment, thinking. Finally, she opened her eyes, smiled, and asked, "Tell me, Brandon, is your cock really as big as everyone used to say it was? I mean, people used to call you Bran-*dong* because you were supposed to have this huge dick. Was it true. Brandon? *Are* you that well endowed?"

Brandon's eyes sparkled as his smile grew and he reached out and took her hand. "Now you're talkin'," he said. "Damned right it was true. Every word of it. Anybody who said otherwise was lying, I can tell you. But, I don't think anybody said otherwise, did they?" He laughed.

Still holding his hand, Margaret said with a smile, "Brandon, no matter how big your prick is or was, it couldn't come close to the size of the prick that *you* are, and always have been. And whether or not it's as big as all those school legends claimed, I hope whatever you've got between your legs drops off. I mean, I hope it just . . . *drops off!*"

His smile crumbled and his hand fell away from hers as he took a surprised step back.

Margaret turned and walked away . . .

26

Having changed into a clean uniform, Derek headed for Lynda's room again.

After being vomited upon, he'd asked a nurse's aid to go into room 406 and clean up the mess. Then he'd gone to the desk and told the unit secretary to contact Dr. Plummer and inform him of Lynda's condition. Then he'd gone to clean up and change.

He walked into room 406, expecting to find Lynda recovered from her rather sudden and violent regurgitation.

The floor beside the bed was clean. A towel had been placed on the bed to cover the mess. The aid, a young Asian woman, Miss Im, was lifting the side rail on the bed. She turned to Derek and said, "I helped her rinse her mouth and washed her face and neck, but I couldn't change the sheets. She's just too weak to move.

"Too weak?"

"Well, look at her."

Miss Im left the room and Derek went to Lynda's bedside.

She was surprisingly pale as she lay crookedly on the bed, her eyes half-open.

"How's it going, Lynda?" he asked.

She made a frail sound and shook her head slowly.

Derek checked her blood pressure. It was very low.

He touched his fingers to her wrist to check her pulse, but couldn't find one. Moving to the other end of the bed, he pulled the blanket back and touched his fingers to her foot to check her pedal pulse. It was barely palpable.

Replacing the blanket, he went back to the head of the bed.

"Can you tell me how you're feeling, Lynda?" he asked.

She turned her head to him slowly and gave him a weak smile.

"Not . . . very good. I don't know why. Things have been . . . so great . . . lately."

He smiled down at her and patted her shoulder. "Don't worry, things are still great. They've just slowed down."

She chuckled.

Her face was so pale.

Derek left the room and went back to the desk, to the unit secretary.

"Did you get Plummer yet?" he asked.

"I paged him. He's not responding."

"Page him again. This time, tell him to get here stat. Something's wrong with Lynda."

27

"I'd rather stand right here," Margaret said pleasantly, her right arm, purse tucked tightly high beneath it, linked through Marty's and his arm holding hers close.

"But that's not where you stood for the group photo when we were in high school," Amelia said, her smile firmly intact, but her voice becoming just a bit impatient.

"Amelia, dear," Margaret said, reaching over to touch her sturdy shoulder for just a moment, "we're not in high school now."

"But the whole point was to reproduce that picture, with everyone standing in exactly the same places they stood back then." Amelia sounded as if she were speaking to a child.

"I'd like to stand here."

"But you can't." Amelia's smile began to twitch.

"I *can't*? I'm sorry, Amelia," Margaret said, still smiling happily, "but I wasn't given a list of rules at the door."

Amelia's smile fell off her face completely and she stood a bit straighter. "This is not the way we decided this would be done."

"We? We *who*? Who is we?"

"The reunion committee."

"But I'm not on the reunion committee," Margaret said.

"That is precisely my point!"

Margaret's smile only grew larger. "Well, what coincidence. That is precisely *my* point, too. I wasn't on the committee, so I wasn't around to tell you that I don't want to stand wherever it is you *want* me to stand . . . I want to stand *here*."

Amelia's cheeks began to turn the shade of candied apples.

Marty turned his face toward Margaret and touched his lips to the hair that fell over her ear.

"It's okay if you go stand where they want you to stand," he whispered.

"But I don't want to," she said, turning her head so that their faces were close enough to kiss.

Smiling, he said, "Maybe just to keep the peace, know what I mean?"

Margaret started to respond, but Amelia grabbed her hand first, and began to pull.

"That's right," Amelia said. "To keep the peace. A lot of work has been put into this and I think you should respect that. Now why don't you just come over to the second row, where you're supposed to be."

Margaret tried to pull her hand away, but Amelia's meaty fingers had a firm grip.

"That's the damned *problem!*" Margaret snapped. "You people spent four years telling me what I'm *supposed to* do, who and what I'm *supposed to* respect and how I'm *supposed to* act, and *you're not* going to do it *now!*" She kept a tight hold of Marty's arm.

Amelia slapped her other hand onto Margaret's wrist and clutched her with her sausage fingers. When she spoke, it was with her lips pulled back and through tightly clenched teeth.

"Then maybe you'd rather not be in the picture at *all!*"

"Goddamn your fuckin' eyes, you *bitch*, let go of me!" Margaret shouted.

The room had become quiet as the attention of all the others turned to Margaret and Amelia and their tugging match.

"Please, Margaret," Marty said, his voice shaky, "maybe it's best if you go along with things and not make such a scene."

Amelia continued to pull on Margaret's hand and arm with both hands.

"I'm *not* making a scene!" Margaret blurted. "This fucking *cunt* is making a scene!"

It happened so suddenly that no one watching the unpleasant scene reacted at first.

First, the blood filled her eyes like tears. Then, it began to spurt ever so lightly, like juice from an orange being peeled, from the corners, spattering her face.

She let go of Margaret's hand and arm and staggered backward, her arms waving as if she were trying to flag down a cab. A noise came from her throat, a gurgling whimper, and then she fell flat on her back with her arms jutting upward stiffly. Then she began to scream.

Her screams became more shrill as she began to rub at her own eyes and gag on her blood as it spurting upward and came back down in her mouth, and as the others began to gather around her frantically to help . . .

28

"Is re something . . . wrong, Derek?" Lynda asked. "You' acting . . . like something's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, realty. It's just that you're having a couple of problems."

"Problems?"

"Hey, things have been going pretty well, haven't they?"

"Yeah . . . they have."

"So, what's a couple of problems, huh? That doesn't mean things aren't still going well, right? It's nothing you can't handle judging from the recovery you've had in the last few days. Besides, Dr. Plummer will be here soon to fix things. So, it's nothing to worry about, right?"

She swept a hand downward over her sweaty face, slowly.
“Yeah . . . right.”

“Feeling sick again?”

“Yeah . . . sick again. Got something . . . for me to puke in?”

“Yep,” he said as he leaned over, grabbed the small garbage can, turned it upside down and emptied it of its wrappers and tissues, then held it before Lynda.

She vomited into it violently, with great, thick splashes. Then she collapsed back onto the bed, panting and weak.

Derek glanced into the garbage can before setting it down. He did a double-take.

Lynda had vomited up more of the food she’d eaten, as she had before . . . but this time it was mixed with dark and glistening swirls of blood . . .

29

Someone shouted, “Call an ambulance!”

Someone else replied, “The ambulance just left here a little while ago.”

Several voices rose then, talking, asking questions.

“What was an ambulance doing here?”

“Somebody had a heart attack.”

“I heard it was Daryl Cotch.”

“Really? Is he dead?”

“I don’t know.”

“He was unconscious.”

“It didn’t look good for him, from what I saw.”

Margaret stared at the writhing Amelia, listening to the voices that came from all around her as Marty put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him.

“My God, what’s wrong with her?” he asked in a whisper.

But she barely heard him. She was beginning to hear her blood rush through her veins with every thunderous beat of her heart.

Goddamn your fuckin eyes, you bitch, let go of me! she had said to Amelia.

And now, Amelia was flopping around on the floor, out of sight now that so many people had gathered around her, with blood gushing from her eyes for no apparent reason.

"Jesus, she's gonna bleed to death if we don't do something!" a woman shrieked.

She'd placed her hand on Daryl Cotch's chest and told him to drop dead . . .

"Call *another* ambulance, dammit!" a man shouted. "There's gotta be more than one around here!"

. . . and now he was being driven away by an ambulance because he'd had a heart attack.

"Oh, my God," Margaret muttered, feeling sick and weak.

Marty held onto her, turned her around so she faced him with both his hands on her shoulders. "Margaret, are you all right? You look awful!"

"What?" she asked faintly, too lost in her own thoughts to make sense of his words

"I said, you look awful. You're not going to pass out, are you?"

"No, no . . . not gonna pass out."

"You're so pale and so . . ." He winced slightly and shook his head without finishing his sentence.

She paid no attention to him. Things were happening inside her head that were beginning to frighten her. Bits of conversation and chunks of memories were beginning to snap together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle . . . and the picture it formed was frightening.

With cold fear clutching her throat, she wondered, *What else have I done?*

At that moment, there was another scream in the large room, a woman, high and shrill and filled with fear and pain.

The crowd around Amelia began to break up and look for the source of the scream.

When they found it, Margaret put a hand over her mouth. Her purse dropped from beneath her arm as she groaned, "Oh, dear God, what have I done?" into her palm . . .

"What the hell's going on?" Dr. Plummer asked Derek as they met up in the corridor and both headed for Lynda's room.

"She's been vomiting," Derek said, speaking rapidly. "At first I thought it was just all that food she's been eating. Now it's mixed with some blood. Blood pressure's low, pulse is weak, and so is she. Very weak."

"I was about to send her home," Dr. Plummer muttered, frowning and clearly puzzled as he entered Lynda's room with Derek right behind him. He went to her bedside, smiled down at her and said, "Hello, Lynda. I understand you've been disobeying house rules by not feeling well."

She was pale and drawn. The very act of breathing seemed to be an effort for her. "Yeah," she whispered, "I'm not . . . feeling well."

Dr. Plummer lowered the side rail, took her blood pressure, felt her pulse in both her wrist and her foot.

"Can you sit up, Lynda?" he asked.

She made a grumbling noise in her throat and turned her head slowly from side to side.

Dr. Plummer sat on the edge of the bed and felt under the edge of her jaw. He made a low "Hmm" sound. Then he reached beneath her arm, probing her armpits with his fingers. He stood quickly and turned to Derek, stepping away from the bed with him, their backs turned to Lynda.

"Somehow, she's gotten much worse," he said. "Her lymph nodes are larger than ever. If she's throwing up blood, I think we should —"

There was a sudden thick, wet sound behind them and they both spun around.

Lynda had vomited all over herself and the bed.

This time, she had vomited nothing but dark, glistening, red blood.

"Call OR!" Dr. Plummer barked as he rushed to Lynda's side. "Tell them we're bringing down an emergency GI bleed stat!"

Derek hurried out of the room.

His eyes were wide, his smooth brow wrinkled with a frown, and his face had paled slightly.

"What the hell has happened?" he whispered to himself . . .

It was Natalie who was screaming. She was on the floor about three yards away from the group that surrounded Amelia.

She was kicking her legs and flailing her arms as people gathered around her to help, to see what was wrong.

“My *God*, Margaret!” Marty hissed, jerking his hands away from her shoulders. “What the hell’s going on?”

Margaret was unable to speak, so she couldn’t have replied even if she’d heard his question. She didn’t even turn to him. Instead, she pulled away from him and moved toward the second group that was forming around Natalie.

Margaret leaned between two people as a woman screamed and ran away from the group with both hands over her mouth, zigzagging through the Queen’s Parlor and out the door.

At first, Margaret could not comprehend what she was seeing. If she’d looked around at the other faces staring down in sickened horror — some of them looking away, and others running away in the direction of the screaming woman — she would have seen that she was not alone. No one seemed able to understand what they were seeing . . . not for several moments, anyway. Then, what was happening to Natalie became clearer, even though it still made no sense, and was no less horrifying.

Natalie lay on her back, her entire body jittering as if she were lying on a cheap motel bed that had been fed several quarters. Her arms and legs were stiff and trembling and jerked occasionally, sometimes violently, as if she’d lost control of them.

Her skin was tightening rapidly.

Actually, “tightening” did not seem to Margaret to be an accurate description. Yes, the skin on her face, neck and hands had tightened so much that those parts of her body looked like the grotesque mask and gloves of a Halloween ensemble.

But it was more accurate to say that the skin was shrinking, because it was beginning to split open. First, over Natalie’s left cheekbone. Then her chin. Then the back of one hand opened up, followed by a section of her scalp just above her forehead. Blood ran from the openings, and began to flow more freely as the cracks in Natalie’s shrinking flesh grew larger and larger, their edges peeling away from her face and head and neck and hands and wrists.

Two things happened at once. First, Natalie’s screams became ragged, wet gagging sounds. Second, her left cheekbone seemed to be crushed, as if by some invisible weight. It made a moist, crunching

sound as it made her left eye bulge from its socket. Then her chin seemed to fold slowly inward, into her mouth, with a hideous crack, as her right hand folded in half, right down the middle, until all four of her fingers were pressed together.

As Natalie's skin continued to peel away, shedding more and more blood, her body began to curl backward, as if she were having a seizure. The popping and breaking sounds that came from all over her body sounded like firecrackers going off in rapid succession.

There was more screaming — from women and men alike — as people continued to turn away, walk away, run away.

Someone, a man, shouted, "What the fuck is going *on* here?"

Margaret backed away as well, confused, frightened and sickened by what was happening to Natalie on the floor . . . but mostly frightened. She turned away, clamping her hands over her ears to block out those horrible cracking and popping sounds. She closed her eyes as well as she stumbled along, putting some distance between herself and the tortured woman on the floor.

What did I do? she thought as tears fell down her cheeks. What did I do to Natalie to cause that? I hardly even talked to her! I didn't say anything to her, I just —

She froze, opened her eyes and stared at nothing, holding her hands an inch from her ears as her mouth opened in realization.

Margaret had said nothing threatening to Natalie, but she had *thought* some awful things as they spoke. And she remembered exactly what that thought had been:

. . . I hope you shrivel up and die, you cunt, I hope you shrivel up to the little doll you always thought you were, and I hope it hurts, too!

The words kept running through her head sharply, cuttingly: *I hope you shrivel up and die . . . I hope you shrivel up. . . shrivel up. . .*

"Oh, no . . . no, no . . . no," Margaret whispered.

A hand touched her shoulder and she spun around to see Marty.

"Margaret, what's wrong with — " His words got caught in his throat as he stumbled backward, away from Margaret.

"Marty, please help me," she said quietly, her voice barely audible above the yammering voices in the room. "Something's wrong. Please help me."

He stared at her in horror. His face became pale as he continued to back away.

“Marty?”

Finally, he turned his back to Margaret and stumbled away, glancing over his shoulder only once as he disappeared into the thinned-out crowd that seemed to be wandering around the room, talking, constantly talking, their voices combining to form a jittering hum.

He was gone.

Margaret stumbled forward. She was unable to control her legs as well as she had just minutes earlier; they felt heavy and artificial, as if someone had removed her own and attached wooden legs to her body.

She slammed into a chubby man with a nametag on the lapel of his suit, but she didn’t have time to read the name.

“Hey, lady,” he said, pushing her away gently, “this is a high school reunion. You shouldn’t even be *in* here!”

She started to give a nasty response, but he was already gone.

What did he mean by that? she wondered. That is was a high school reunion . . . that I shouldn’t be in here?

Margaret decided the best thing to do was to get out of the room, as soon as possible. In fact, she decided to get out of the hotel, to get back into her car and put it all behind her.

It was a mistake, that’s all. Just a horrible, horrible mistake. She hadn’t really *meant* to do anything to anyone. She was still unaware other abilities, unaware of whatever it was this “gift” allowed her to do, so it wasn’t her fault, it *couldn’t* be her fault because she hadn’t *meant to do anything to anyone!*

It was all just a mistake, and she had to put it behind her as soon as possible . . .

32

Lynda had been rushed into the operating room only minutes after vomiting blood all over herself and her bed.

Everyone moved quickly, smoothly and professionally, until Lynda was lying anesthetized beneath the bright lights of surgery.

Dr. Plummer — talking constantly, asking for Lynda’s vitals, giving orders — opened Lynda’s abdomen.

He usually had Bach playing in the operating room as he performed surgery, but he hadn’t taken the time to slip a disk into the stereo.

Even if he had, he wouldn't have heard the music . . . not as he looked inside Lynda Donnelly. In fact, none of the others in the room would have heard the music either . . . not over the sound of Dr. Plummer's voice.

"Jesus *Christ!*" he blurted, his eyes gaping over his surgical mask, his forehead beaded with perspiration. "*Holy Jesus Christ!*"

Then, he just stared silently down at his patient, at her insides, his mask puffing out then sucking in with his rapid breaths . . .

33

In the lobby of the Royal House, people were hurrying back and forth frantically; some of the women were crying; some of the men looked horrified; nearly all of them were wearing nametags, but they passed Margaret this way and that so quickly that she recognized none of them. She felt like a city girl on a dude ranch caught in the middle of a stampede of cattle.

As she headed for shelter in the restroom, she stumbled in her heels. She suddenly felt very uncomfortable in the tight velvet sheath. In fact, it felt tighter in places than it had before; her hips felt squeezed by the material, as if they might rip through at any moment. She pressed a hand on the strapless top, afraid that it might drop down over her breasts.

Margaret pushed through the restroom door, vaguely noticing that it seemed much heavier than it had before. Once inside, she heard two female voices, one crying while the other spoke frantically, trying to sound soothing. They echoed slightly in the large tiled room. As she walked along the row of sinks, she saw no one else around, and assumed the voices were coming from a stall.

"Now, stop crying, stop crying," one woman said. "I'm sure it'll stop, I'm sure it's just . . . oh, God . . . okay, we'll get you cleaned up and call a doctor and —"

"But it's *not* stopping, Beth, it's *not!*"

Margaret recognized the voice of the woman who was crying: Libby Shore.

"*My God, it's not stopping!*" Libby cried, her voice shrill and cracked.

"Please, calm down, Libby, I'll have to leave and get to a phone and —"

“No, God, no, please don’t *leave me!*”

As they went on — Libby crying, the one named Beth consoling but sounding very nervous — Margaret bent forward, one hand on the edge of the sink as she stepped quietly along, looking beneath the doors of the stalls.

She saw the blood first. It was puddled and spattered on the beige and white tile floor in the last stall, the one against the far wall of the restroom. And it was running down the unmistakable stick-like legs of Libby Shore, running over her almost frail-looking calves and shins in rivulets.

“I think I’m gonna faint, Beth, I really do, I *do*,” Libby said, beginning to pant instead of sob.

Margaret stood up straight, frowning as she leaned her hips back on the edge of the sink, her hand still pressed to her chest.

Her heart thundered inside her as the crying and the talking went on and on . . . and the bleeding.

Bleeding, she thought. My God more bleeding. What . . . have I done now?

She closed her eyes and thought back to her conversation with the three women in the Royal Lounge.

“You’re so *beautiful!*” Libby had said just before embracing Margaret.

And Margaret had thought, while hugging Libby Shore, the once beautiful, popular Libby Shore, who had always been so proud of her periods in a complaining way, Margaret had thought, *Oh, yeah, you too, you fucking twat, and I hope the next period you have gushes like a river and you drop dead in the puddle! Let’s see how proud you’ll be of that one!*

Margaret’s eyes moved down slowly as she covered her mouth with a hand, moved down until they were looking at the blood that was gathering on the floor of that stall.

She started to move sideways, hips still pressed to the lip of the counter, hand still over her mouth.

“You’ll have to stay here while I — ”

“No, please, don’t leave me alone, I’m gonna be sick, I’m gonna faint, I swear!” Libby babbled.

“Just sit down on the toilet and try to relax,” the woman named Beth said. “I’ll just be a few seconds. I just need to find a phone — ”

The stall door opened and a non-descript woman with silver-streaked brown hair stepped out. Her eyes widened when she saw Margaret standing against the sinks, staring at the stall.

"Oh, thank God," the woman said. She blinked a few times and looked Margaret up and down quickly with what looked like disgust. But she recovered quickly. "Ma'am. I've got a sick woman in here, could you get help? Find a doctor? Or better yet, just go to a phone and call an ambulance, okay? She's really sick."

Margaret just kept moving along the edge of the counter, walking like a crab, her heels making staggered clicks on the tile.

"Ma'am, could you please do that for me?" the woman asked. "Ma'am?"

Margaret reached the end of the counter and stumbled slightly.

"Are you all right, honey?"

There was a sound from the stall then, from behind Beth.

Libby fell. The sound of her head cracking on something hard was loud and unmistakable, and more than a little sickening.

Her bloody legs slipped out beneath the door of the adjoining stall having slid under the partition, and began to kick rapidly. Her heels made a clickety-clattery sound on the tile, the sound of a drunken tap-dancer, except that it was a moist sound, cushioned by the blood that now clung to Libby's shoes like a skin.

"Oh my God!" Beth cried, spinning around and looking down at the now limp form on the bloody floor. Without looking at Margaret again, the woman bent over Libby and shouted, "Get someone! Please get someone!"

Margaret staggered through the restroom's small lounge and back into the lobby.

The ambulance had arrived and its lights were spinning outside the glass doors of the entrance. Paramedics were rushing through the crowded lobby with a stretcher and their equipment.

Margaret turned away from them and began to walk, just walk as quickly as she could. But that was not very fast. She could hardly take a steady step. Surely she hadn't had that much to drink, had she?

Her dress felt tighter around her hips, so confining that it was difficult to walk. And the top felt even looser than before. She knew that if she took her hand away, it would fall open.

She kept walking, stumbling, staggering, until she found herself in a narrow, dimly lighted corridor.

She smelled food cooking. There were muffled voices nearby, and the sounds of clattering metal and plates.

The kitchen, she thought. The kitchen's around here somewhere. Maybe there's a back way out. Yeah, I won't have to go through the lobby again. Just get the hell out of here, get to the car and leave. Yeah.

A shaft of light came from an alcove up ahead and to the right. She hurried toward it, turned, saw the big door with the window in it, saw people scurrying around inside, in the kitchens and she moved forward, hand out to open the door.

Her foot kicked something and she tripped, falling against the wall to the left of the door as she looked down.

A man was sprawled on the floor, sitting up with his back to the wall opposite her. His legs were spread, but not very far, because his pants were pulled down to mid-thigh.

He was murmuring, voice garbled, words unintelligible.

He was covered with blood.

Margaret saw that he was holding something in his bloody right hand, something small and limp and glistening with blood.

She looked at his face.

His eyes were wide and his mouth was working in a rubbery sort of way. He was white as flour.

It was Brandon Lyons.

"Oh, no, oh God no!" Margaret groaned. She spun around the corner of the alcove and into the corridor, doubled over and vomited onto the carpet. Her hand dropped from her chest and when she finally stood and leaned against the wall, exhausted, the top of her sheath crumpled down around her breasts. But she didn't notice, and she wouldn't have cared if she had.

She knew only one thing: she had to get out of the hotel.

Margaret turned and went back the way she came, though she wasn't quite sure where she was. She ducked into one corridor, then another, realizing they were the wrong ones, all the while wondering what else she had done, what else she had thought, what other use she had made, however inadvertently, of what Mrs. Watkiss had called a "gift".

As she finally staggered into the lobby, a woman screamed.

Margaret remembered a thought she'd had while hugging Vikki Robinson earlier, a thought that had been hidden behind a gushy smile:

. . . I hope you lose that figure, you cunt . . .

There was another scream.

. . . I hope you blow up like a balloon — your fucking sagging cheeks, too . . .

As Margaret made her clumsy way to the lobby's entrance with the top of her dress sagging beneath her bare breasts there was a third scream, this one sounding as sickened as it sounded horrified. It was quickly joined by others.

. . . I hope you get so fat you explode, you manipulating slut!

There was a commotion in a far corner of the lobby where two sofas and some chairs were arranged by the large front window.

. . . explode.. explode . . . explode . . .

Oh, God please no, Margaret thought.

The sound was sudden and unlike anything she'd ever heard before. It was an explosive sound, but a muted one, a wet one. It was followed by several thick splashing sounds as something splatted onto the side of Margaret's face with enough force to knock her sideways.

Margaret slammed into the wall.

The screams became deafening.

Leaning against the wall, Margaret wiped the side of her face and looked down to see that her hand was covered with blood and that a stringy, viscous substance was dangling from her fingers.

She tried to scream, but couldn't. She had no voice

Margaret stumbled away from the cold wall and turned to it.

It was the mirrored section of the lobby wall against which she'd fallen. Now it was spattered with blood. But she could still see her reflection. Quite clearly. Too clearly.

As she stared at herself, Margaret's voice returned with a vengeance.

She screamed so loudly that it hurt her throat. Once she started, she found that she couldn't stop screaming, even when she tried. But she was simply contributing to the cacophony of screams that were rising in the now bloody lobby, and no one paid her any attention.

They didn't even notice when she finally swallowed her screams and staggered out of the hotel, her arms pressed over the top of her dress to hold it in place, her throat making the sounds of a beaten child . . .

34

"This can't be," Dr. Plummer hissed, staring down at his patient.

It was everywhere.

"This just . . . can't . . . *be!* The MRI was clear, everything was fine . . . *she* was fine!"

Lynda's abdomen was filled with cancer. There was not a fraction of a centimeter of tissue inside her that was not covered with it, that did not have the cancer growing out of it from inside. The tumorous mass of cancer made it almost impossible to make out the intestines, the stomach and liver and other organs.

The cancer not only had returned . . . it apparently had brought reinforcements.

"Blood pressure dropping fast," the anesthesiologist said.

"I just . . . I don't . . . I can't understand this!" Dr. Plummer whispered to no one in particular.

He could do nothing more than stare at the masses of rebellious cells. And that was what paralyzed him so completely, what made his rubber-gloved hands clench into fists as his back became rigid. He could do nothing more than that.

Dr. Plummer could do nothing at all . . .

35

Margaret knew people were staring. Of *course* they were staring. Who would be wearing a hooded yellow rain-slicker in Arizona? Especially in an Arizona hospital? But she didn't — she couldn't — care.

The rainslicker had come from the trunk of her car. She always kept one there, just in case, along with her spare tire, jack, some flares, a jug of water and all the other things that safety-minded people kept in the trunk when they traveled often. This was the first time she'd had to use the slicker . . . and instead of protecting herself from the rain, she

was hiding herself from other people. She found that odd, like something Erma Bombeck might write, if the woman had a sick sense of humor and a twisted imagination.

The hood did a fine job of concealing her face, but it also made it hard for her to see. In fact, the slicker made movement awkward because it felt so heavy and seemed so enormous.

Walking as quickly and as steadily as she could, Margaret headed straight for Lynda's room. She'd cried all the way to the hospital, driving very slowly, not trusting herself, and now her eyes were still stinging and sticky from tears and everything looked rather blurry, but not so blurry that she couldn't recognize the door of room 406.

She stared at the door, wondering what she would say to Lynda, how she would explain herself. Deciding to deal with that later, she pushed through the door.

Margaret thought for a moment, as the door closed behind her, as she stared at Lynda's bed, that her heart had stopped.

The bed was empty, and dark with blood.

"Lynda?" she asked, her thick voice cracking. "Oh, God, Lynda? What's happened, Lynda?"

She began crying again as she staggered to the bed, nearly falling onto it. Her sobs were erratic and made her sound as if she were choking.

"She's gone," a frail voice came from behind the drape around the other bed. "Who's there?"

Trying to pull herself together, Margaret made her clumsy way across the room and ripped the drape aside.

"What's happened to my sister?" she asked the old woman lying on the bed.

A frown grew slowly on Mrs. Watkiss's face as she looked up at Margaret from her halo of thin white hair spread over the pillow. She seemed to sink into the mattress, to deflate beneath the blankets.

"Oh, no," the old woman breathed, shaking her head slightly. "No, no, not you, honey. I thought I'd told you. Maybe I didn't say enough, maybe I wasn't . . . well, I've never been very good with words, so —"

"What's happened to my sister?" Margaret hissed, leaning forward over the bed, her hands on the side rail.

"I didn't know at first. But now . . . I think I do. You went sour on the gift, didn't you?"

"Would you quit talking that crap and just tell me about Lynda?"

"She felt it, too . . . you souring on the gift like you did . . . however you did it."

Margaret burned with an anger she was now too weak to express fully, but she reached down with her right hand and closed a fist over the thin material of Mrs. Watkiss's hospital gown, just beneath her shoulder.

"Dammit, would you answer my question, old woman?"

Mrs. Watkiss chuckled, but it was a sad sound, with no fear. She kept chuckling, but she did not smile. "I'm not so old, like you think," she said quietly.

Still clutching the old woman's thin gown, Margaret took in a deep breath and spoke as she exhaled. "Just tell me what happened to Lynda."

After a moment, Mrs. Watkiss said, "She got very sick. Started vomiting blood. They took her to surgery."

Margaret released the gown and leaned forward, her forearms on the siderail. "Oh, my God. How could that be? She was . . . doing so . . . well."

"I told you. But maybe I wasn't clear enough. Like I said, I ain't so good with words. It's probably my fault. See, you can heal . . . or you can hurt. Can't do both. The gift don't let you. You gotta decide, see, that's the thing. I didn't know. Least, not till it was too late. I suppose you can kill, too, 'cause it's a powerful thing, the gift. I didn't go that far, thank God, but not for lack of tryin'. I hurt some, though. Yeah? I hurt 'em bad. Didn't even realize I was doin' it at the time, but that's what I did. And that's why I tried to warn you. But I . . . well . . . guess I didn't do so good, huh?"

"What . . . what are you talking about?"

"You fixed your sister's cancer. That was good. But then, you did something else. I don't know what. But it was bad. Fixing your sister was good . . . you did something bad — to somebody else, prob'ly — your sister suffered for it."

Angry again, Margaret stood straight, hands on the side rail. "You're just a crazy old woman," she said wearily.

"If I'm crazy, how come you look like that?"

Margaret put a hand to her face, first to touch it, remembering what she'd seen in the mirror.

"And by the way, I ain't no old woman?" Mrs. Watkiss whispered.

Margaret heard the door open, heard soft footsteps come into the room.

"I'm only thirty-eight years old." Mrs. Watkiss smiled, showing her long, yellow teeth. She whispered, "I'm like this 'cause I went sour on the gift."

Margaret folded her arms over her breasts suddenly, tightly, and stumbled backward, suddenly feeling very cold. She bumped into someone and spun around.

"Can I help you?"

It was a male nurse. Probably Derek, the one Lynda had told her about.

"Where's Lynda?" Margaret asked, forcing the words up from her chest.

"Are you a relative?"

"Dammit, I'm her . . . I'm . . ." He'd never believe that she was her sister. Never. "I'm . . . a friend."

"Oh. Well, I think it would be best if you spoke to her doctor. That would be Dr. Plummer. If you'd like, I can — "

"I don't *want* to speak to Dr. Plummer!" Margaret said, her voice raspy. "I want to know what's happened to my sis — um, to my friend, and I want to know right *now!*"

"Well, ma'am I really can't talk to you about that. See, that's the doctor's job, and I can call him for you if you'd like."

"No, I *wouldn't* like, Goddammit!" Margaret shouted, swinging her fists through the air in frustration. The sudden movement made the hood fall back slightly, revealing her face.

The male nurse's eyes widened and he pulled his head back a bit. His lips twitched slightly, but he said nothing.

Seeing his weakness, Margaret reached up and pulled the hood back completely as she backed away from him toward the door of the room until she thumped against it.

The nurse's eyes were wider now and he had a sort of wincing expression on his face.

"I'm not moving from where I stand until you tell me what happened to my sister," she growled.

"Your . . . sister?"

“Lynda Donnelly, you idiot! What the *fuck* happened to Lynda Donnelly?”

He swallowed a couple times, licked his lips. “It’s not my job to . . . I mean, I’m just a nurse, and — ”

“Are you going to tell me, or not?”

“She . . . passed away. Just a little while ago.”

Margaret released a gush of breath, as if she’d been slugged in the stomach. “What . . . how . . . how could that happen? They said . . . the cancer . . . was gone?”

“It, um . . . well, it seems it came back. Suddenly. But I really think you should talk to Dr. Plummer and — ”

Before he could finish, Margaret turned and pulled the door open, stumbling into the corridor. She wanted to run, but she couldn’t. Not anymore. All she knew was that she had to get out of the hospital.

She did not know where she would go or what she would do with herself.

Margaret knew only one thing. She had killed her sister . . .

36

It was a small ceremony in the chapel of the Evergreen Mortuary, which was located on the edge of the Evergreen Cemetery, where Lynda Donnelly was to be buried.

The man standing at the pulpit over the casket, the top half of which was open, was Pastor Gerald Craney, pastor of the church that Lynda had attended before becoming ill. The pews in the small chapel were scattered with friends and co-workers and members of the church.

Pastor Craney was speaking softly of the coming resurrection when Christ would return and take up His followers, when someone walked through the double doors in the back.

It was someone small and hunched over, someone wearing a yellow rainslicker with a large hood that swallowed the head of the person wearing it.

The pastor faltered for a moment, then continued.

The figure made its way down the center aisle between the columns of pews, zigzagging the whole way, staggering, but in a hurry.

Finally, Pastor Craney stopped, frowning and stiffening as the figure reached the front of the chapel and threw itself onto the open casket.

"I can help you!" the figure cried in a voice of sandpaper and gravel, leaning over the open half of the casket and wrapping its hands around the corpse.

Panicky voices rose from those in the pews.

Pastor Craney said into the small microphone that curved toward him from the back of the pulpit, "Please, please, I understand your grief, but if you'll just —"

"I can make it up to you!" the figure shouted. "I can bring you back! I *can!* I *really can!* I healed you! I can bring you back! Please don't go away because of what I did! Please don't! I can bring you back!"

Members of the small gathering moved in, but the figure only turned around and began to pound them with small, frail fists and kicking again and again.

"Someone please call the police," Pastor Craney said gently into the microphone. "And perhaps an ambulance."

The hood of the yellow rainslicker fell away as the figure struggled and a few people gasped.

The face was that of a very, very old woman. Impossibly old. And it was covered with large, chocolate colored lumps the size of marbles. They were everywhere, even on her cheeks, which were so hollow that she seemed to be sucking them in. Her head was mostly bald, with thin, straggly strands of white hair of various lengths extending from the exposed scalp in a frazzled, mussed way.

"No, please, don't take me away!" she cried in her hoarse voice, which was becoming more and more frail as she spoke. "Please don't! I can help her! I put her there! I can bring her back! I can bring her back, really, it sounds crazy, but it's true, I promise! I can . . . I can . . . bring her back! . . . I can. I . . . can. She's my . . . my sister, and I . . . I love her. I love her . . . my sister . . ."

The police came, followed by the paramedics. The babbling old woman had no I.D. on her, and she was incapable of doing any real harm . . . but she was definitely crazy.

The police turned her over to the paramedics, who put her in the ambulance and headed for Sisters of Mercy Hospital.

All the way there, she babbled on and on. Something about killing her sister and being given some horrible gift . . .

Two

Choices

FOR RANDALL TERRY, PAT ROBERTSON . . . AND THEIR FAMILIES

The whole family was up early because it was Friday. Friday was a special day for the Holts and they were all wide awake in spite of the intrusions on their sleep.

There had been an explosive summer storm late the night before with thunder so loud it shook the house and rattled the windows and woke the whole family. Summer storms were not uncommon . . . but something about this one was most uncommon, indeed.

In fact, the thunder had been so spectacular it sounded more like bombs dropping nearby, like a war had broken out outside. And the *lightning!* It had flashed an electric blue, sending its light through the closed curtains and across the floors. And sometimes . . . just for a heartbeat every now and then . . . the blinding blue had become a strange reddish-orange. Al and Nita had reassured the children it was just God's own nature reminding them of His strength, protection and love. But Al was so concerned, he walked through the dark of the house in his pajamas and stood by the front window looking outside.

From the north, a silver bolt of lightning cut through the clouds; from the south, a reddish-orange bolt clawed its way through the sky.

A strong wind blew as the lightning changed the night sky from black to blue to a blood-like color, flooding over the other houses in the neighborhood in torrents. Trees tossed this way and that.

But no rain fell.

At the time — although it would not occur to him in the morning — Al found it odd that no rain was falling . . .

But now it was a bright summer morning and school had been out for nearly a month. Al was pleased the kids would be able to participate today. It was something they enjoyed every bit as much as a church picnic, so they were especially boisterous this morning, the first ones at the breakfast table.

Al was a little late to breakfast, though, as was his habit on Friday mornings. After showering and dressing, he spent more time than usual in Bible study and prayer, preparing himself for what was ahead, sitting on the edge of the bed with his back straight, his King James Bible open on his lap. The bedroom door was always closed and locked during this time, this very private, quiet time.

When he was finished reading, he closed the Bible reverently, set it on the nightstand and knelt beside the bed, back still straight, folded his hands on the bed, bowed his head and closed his eyes. He prayed aloud.

“Dear Lord, thank you for this new day You have given us. Thank you for our fine family, our beautiful children, and for showing us the truth and wisdom that so many others have chosen to ignore. Be with us today as we go out to do Your work. Guide us as we try to hold back the tides of sin, to prevent sinners from making their condition worse by killing innocent and helpless human beings. Speak through our lips, use our hands as tools, and let our work make a difference in bringing an end to the holocaust perpetrated by wicked and hateful agents of the devil. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.”

Then he stood and went to the kitchen, which smelled warmly of eggs, bacon and coffee.

“Morning,” he said cheerfully.

Both children — eight-year-old Matthew and nine-year-old Ruth — returned the greeting happily. The food was on the table, their empty plates before them, and they waited patiently; no one ate until Father had seated himself at the table and the blessing had been asked.

Nita was still in the kitchen, getting the rest of the food. She was nicely dressed and a bit more made up than usual: lipstick, a dab of rouge, a touch of eye shadow and a little mascara. Once she was seated at the table, all of them automatically bowed their heads.

“Dear Lord, we thank You for this food,” Al said, “and for our loving Christian home. We ask that You march with us today as we go forth as soldiers for Your cause to stop the murder of unborn babies

and expose the worldly, misguided women who kill them to Your Word and Your will. In the name of Jesus — ”

They all said “amen” together, raised their heads, then Nita began moving around the table, serving up the food.

Al noticed a folded newspaper on the table beside his plate. “Is this yesterday’s? I didn’t get a chance to read yesterday’s paper.”

“That’s why I kept it, dear. Today’s hasn’t come yet. It’s too early.”

“That was some storm last night, huh?” Al asked.

Everyone agreed politely.

“Something odd about it, did you notice, Nita?”

“Just that it was very loud.” She scooped scrambled eggs onto his plate.

“A lot of electricity . . . even for an electrical storm. Made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I wonder if there’ll be anything about it in today’s paper.” He opened yesterday’s paper and his head nodded up and down as he scanned the headlines and articles. “Well, what do you know,” he said, folding the paper outward neatly so he could hold it in one hand as he read and ate. “They finally executed that killer upstate.”

“The one who killed those women?” Nita asked, circling the table again to dole out the bacon strips.

“Uh-huh. The electric chair. It’s about time. All those stays of execution . . . I’m telling you, if it were up to the liberals and lawyers, the streets would be running with these crazies. They should be killed as soon as they’re caught.”

“Al, please,” Nita said quietly. “The children.”

“Well, it’s true. They should learn early. The Bible says ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ and ‘The wages of sin is death’. Case closed. No left wing lawyer has any business putting himself before the Word of God.”

Once she was through, Nita seated herself at the table.

Al munched on a piece of bacon as he read on. He chuckled. “Oh, listen to this. You know what his last words were? ‘I’m right with God, and that’s all that matters.’ Can you believe that? ‘I’m right with God!’ From the mouth of a brutal murderer! A serial killer.”

“Well,” Nita said, taking a dainty bite of scrambled eggs, “they *did* say he wasn’t in control of himself. That he was sick. Mentally ill.”

“Nita, for crying out loud, you’re not starting to think like *them*, are you? Insanity! Well of course he was insane! Using it as an excuse is

like saying — “He made his voice thin and whiny.” — ‘I didn’t mean to.’ It’s ridiculous, just plain ridiculous. And don’t let me hear you saying things like that again, Nita. It makes me nervous, you talking like a liberal, like some Godless left-wing reprobate.”

“Daddy, what’s a rep-ro-bate?” Matthew asked.

“It’s someone who is going to burn in hell because they’ve turned their back on God’s Truth.”

“What’s a liberal?” Ruth asked.

“The same thing.” He opened the paper again and began paging through it. “You know, it’s sad to say, but this paper seems to get more liberal every day. Anybody who says there’s no slant to the press is blind as a bat.” He scanned the pages and stopped on something. “Well, what do you know. An article about us.”

Nita and both children shot their heads up to look at him.

“What?” Nita asked, surprised.

“About the coalition. It says, ‘After last week’s demonstration in front of the Women’s Health Clinic’ — *health* clinic, can you believe that? It’s a *butcher* shop! — ‘police are prepared for any possible violent outbursts that may occur at tomorrow’s weekly demonstration by the Coalition for Unborn Life.’ What outbursts? It was just one of those guys escorting a woman into the clinic who got carried away, is all. We had to defend ourselves. He grabbed one of the cameras — remember? — threw it to the ground and started jumping up and down on it.”

“Oh, yes, I remember,” Nita said. “Mr. Stanfield was very upset. He said that Nikon was terribly expensive. And besides, it was a gift.”

“Oh, and look at this! They talk about these ‘*pro-choice*’ people! I still don’t understand what all this ‘*pro-choice*’ business is! What’s to choose? They’re killing babies! Besides, we’re *pro-life*. They should be called what they are. *Anti-life*! I mean, how can we be pro-something and *they* be pro-something at the same time? They are anti-life, and that’s all there is to it!” He pounded a fist on the table.

“I understand, Al, but . . . well, aren’t you getting a little angry?”

“Yes, yes, you’re right. I’m sorry.” He read the paper with a frown and a sigh. “So . . . the police will be out there with us this morning. Fine, that’s just fine. We know who’s side *they’re* on . . . and we know Who is on *our* side.” He shook his head slowly. “If only this country would go back to it’s roots, back to God and Christianity and the val-

ues that made it the strongest, richest, most powerful country in all the world. God and family and the Bible. But . . . I guess that will take a while. It'll happen . . . it'll just take a while."

He set the paper aside and dug into his breakfast, anxious to get on with the day's work, anxious to go head to head, once again, with God's enemies . . .

"You have all the signs?" Al asked.

"They're already in the station wagon," Nita said.

"All the cameras? I've got two."

"So do I."

"Matthew? Ruth? You have your cameras?"

The children nodded. Each had a brightly colored camera around the neck — Matthew's was blue and Ruth's was pink. Each camera was very easy to use, made specifically for children. "And who do you take pictures of?"

"The people going inside." Matthew said.

"And the people taking them in," Ruth said.

"And why?" Al asked.

Together, the children recited, "So they will know that their crimes against God have been recorded."

Al smiled and nodded slowly. "Very good, very good. You'll have extra jewels in your heavenly crowns for this, you know."

The children smiled up at their father and nodded happily.

"Okay," he said, clapping his hands together, "let's go. They'll be gathering there by now. We don't want to be too late. I'll go out and start the car. Make sure we've got everything, then come on out and we'll be off."

Jangling his keys in his right hand, two cameras dangling from around his neck, Al went out the door, down the front walk, crossed the lawn toward the carport and —

— then he froze. He looked around, looked up and down the street. Something was . . . well, not quite right. But he couldn't put his finger on it. He frowned as he looked this way and that.

Had Baxter torn out his hedge recently? It was gone, completely gone. But then, who could tell *what* Baxter would do next? He was an atheist *and* a liberal — a noxious combination — and a bachelor who paraded different women in and out of his house at night and in the

early morning hours. Al had talked with Jerry Baxter a few times, just to be neighborly, but only to find they had nothing in common.

Baxter liked to fancy himself a “thinker” and had shelves of books filled with cold and soulless secular humanism. So if he’d taken out the hedge in the last day or so . . . what of it?

But that big oak tree that used to shade the Genoveses’ yard was gone, too; there wasn’t even a stump left, just . . . nothing but a sunny, empty yard. They were a Catholic family, but good people, with five children who used to swing from the tire that hung from one of the tree’s branches. And there was something else . . .

Either he was just noticing it for the first time or all of the houses on the street had been repainted *very* recently. And they were all the same color: a metallic-grey trimmed with deep red, almost a *blood* red.

All the houses except for his, which was still a light blue with white trim.

Even more bizarre was that an American flag was waving in the warm breeze in every single yard but his. Of course, there was nothing wrong with flying the flag. But they weren’t hung from flagpoles, these were all flying . . . from *crosses*.

His frown deepened and he muttered, “When did . . . how long ago did they . . .”

“It’s getting late, honey,” Nita called from in the house.

“Yeah, yeah, okay,” he muttered, still frowning, still looking around. He turned and started toward the car again when he heard what sounded like a siren . . . except it wasn’t, really.

It was a siren-like sound that played the first seven notes of a tune, a very *familiar* tune, over and over again. And it was drawing closer.

The tune was “Jesus Loves Me.”

Tires squealed over pavement down at the intersection and Al looked back to see a shiny, squat black car with a disproportionately large, boxy rear-end and white doors that had official-looking markings on them screech to a halt before his house. There was a spinning red light on the car’s roof. It was a police car . . . but it looked like no police car he’d ever seen before. Instead of a gold or silver star or police shield on the door, this car had a metallic-grey cross with blood-red stains at the ends of the crossbar and at the bottom. And from the top of the cross flew the American flag, as if in a strong, whipping wind.

Both doors opened and two officers bolted out of the car in black uniforms. Each had, as a badge, a metallic-grey cross pinned over his heart. Large, odd-looking guns were holstered to their belts and they wore shiny black helmets that left only their faces visible. And their faces looked very similar to one another: hard, stern, iron-jawed and *very* unhappy.

One of the men — the driver — unsnapped his holster and removed a very curvy, smooth-looking gun of shiny black metal and said, “Sorry, sir, but I’m afraid you’re under temporary detention until you can explain a few things.”

“What’s going on here?” Al asked, not sounding very friendly, as he frowned at the two uniformed men and eyed the unholstered gun.

“Don’t you at least know enough to cross yourself when you see a Deacon, Brother?” the second officer barked.

“A Deacon? Cross my . . . ? What are you *talking* about?”

The first one, the one with the gun, smirked. “Well, if I have to tell you, then you’re in even more trouble than I thought.”

“For one thing,” the second one said, waving toward the house, “this paint job is not regulation.”

“It’s blasphemous. You ought to know that. How long ago did you paint it?”

“I painted this house three years ago. *Myself!* And I’d like to know just what you think is *wrong* with it!”

“You looked around at your neighborhood lately?” the first one asked sarcastically, gesturing with the gun. “Regulation colors.”

“*Those* colors,” the other one said, pointing at the bloodstained, metallic-grey cross on the door of the car.

“And where’s your flag-cross? In fact . . . now that I notice it, you’re not even *wearing* a cross, are you?”

“Wearing a” Al’s voice dropped to a puzzled, but still angry, mutter as his frown deepened. “Well, I don’t normally wear a — ”

“Don’t *normally*? Okay, let’s see some I.D., Brother.”

“Well, I-I” He fumbled for his wallet and held it open so they could see his driver’s license.

“What’s *that*?” the second one snapped.

“You know what we want to see. Your CA scancard.”

“Scan . . . CA . . . scancard? Hey, look, I don’t what you’re — ”

“Church of America scancard so we can scan your barcode,” the gunholder growled impatiently.

Al could only stare at them silently.

“Either you’re suffering from some sort of demon-possession or you are a very, very bold Churchstate Sinner.”

“I . . . I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re . . . Churchstate?” he squinted at them, craning his head forward. Then, fists clenched at his sides, he snapped, “Well, I don’t know what’s wrong with *you*, but I am *certainly* not possessed!”

At that moment, the front door opened and the children came out.

“How come you haven’t started the car, Daddy?” Ruth called.

“Yeah, Dad, we’re gonna be late,” Matthew said.

Both officers looked at the children with widening eyes. The second one drew his gun as well.

“These are both *your* children?” the first one asked, shocked.

Before Al could respond, the front door closed and Nita locked it behind her, then came down the steps to join them. As the children stared curiously at the officers, the officers looked at Nita with horror and each quickly made the sign of the cross over himself.

“You’re all under arrest!” the first one shouted.

All of them froze.

Al said, “Wait just a second, here, officer, I think you could at least tell us — ”

“*Deacon!* You’ll address me properly — as *Deacon* — or you’ll be in even *more* trouble.”

“Okay, then, *Deacon!*” Al shouted. “If you’re arresting us, what are the charges? And why aren’t you dressed in police *uniforms* and driving a police *car*?”

The two officers looked at one another in disbelief.

“I said,” Al repeated, fists still clenched, “*what are the charges?*” But his fists were trembling now, trembling because of his confusion and, no matter how hard he tried to fight it, his fear.

“Crimes against the Churchstate,” the first one said. “Your house is painted blasphemously, you have no cross-flag. You have two children, *obviously*. And your wife is painted like a slutty witch!”

Nita’s mouth dropped open with a gasp.

“Chuh-children?” Al croaked, glancing at Nita as she hurried to his side, looking frightened. “What *about* our children?”

"One child per family according to population regulations. The girl will have to go." He turned to his partner and muttered, "Box her."

The officer removed a small black device from the breast pocket of his shirt, touched the barrel of it to Ruth's temple and there was a quick, quiet *Zap!* sound. Ruth fell to the grass in a limp heap.

Nita screamed and ran to her daughter's side.

Al lunged toward his fallen child, but the first officer put the gun in his face. "Don't move."

Matthew hurried to Al's side and Al put an arm around the boy, holding him close.

Nita screamed and cried hysterically as the other officer picked Ruth up under one arm. "My little girl my little girl, *what are you doing to my little girl!*"

The first officer nodded toward Nita. "Do her too and shut her up!" he growled.

With another zap, Nita was silent and on the ground. The officer carried Ruth to the car, opened up the large, boxy rear, threw her inside roughly, then closed it.

"My wife!" Al shouted, holding Matthew tight. "My daughter! Damn you, what are you *doing* with them?"

"Watch your language, you heathen," the officer growled, pressing the gun to Al's cheek.

Tears welled up in Al's eyes as his entire body grew cold, as helplessness coiled around him like an enormous snake and began to squeeze. His breath came faster and faster as he gasped, "What're you gonna do to our . . . little girl?"

"She'll be recycled," the officer replied as if it were a stupid question. "Given to an infertile family so they can have their allotted single child." He moved very close to Al, until their faces were about an inch apart; he squinted, cocked his head curiously. "What . . . is . . . wrong with you, anyway?"

Al felt anger boiling in his stomach, burning its way up through his chest, felt his teeth clench and his lips tremble as he growled, "Wrong with me? What the devil is wrong with you? Who are you and what gives you —"

The officer punched Al in the gut, knocking the wind, and the words, from him, doubling him over and sending him to his knees.

Holding the gun on the top of Al's head, the officer snapped, "I told you to watch your language! I can *shoot* you for using Satanic language like that, Brother!"

Al grunted, retched and, when his vision cleared again, he turned his head toward Nita, who remained motionless on the grass.

"Nita," he rasped as he started toward her, crawling on hands and knees, "Nita, honey, it's gonna be okay, it's gonna — "

The officer pressed a shiny black boot down on him hard. "Stay right where you are. Stay away from her. You too, boy. Don't move. For the time being, she's condemned."

Al turned his head and looked up at the officer. "Con . . . demned? For *what*?" he hissed furiously.

The officer got down on one knee, close to Al, and when he spoke, there was, for just a moment, some humanity in that square-jawed face, in those steely eyes and in that harsh, deep voice.

"You . . . you really don't *know*, do you, Brother?" the officer whispered.

Al shook his head slowly as a tear ran down his pale cheek. "No, no . . . I don't. I don't understand anything you're telling me."

The officer frowned at him, not angrily, but curiously, as if there was something about Al's face that bothered him . . . disturbed him.

"Your wife will be given the Mark of the Beast on her forehead," he said, speaking slowly, "then sent to a Prayer Camp for such time as decided by one of the Churchstate High Priests. When she has truly repented of all her sins . . ." He studied Al's face even more deeply. ". . . and has given her soul back to Christ . . . she will be released back into society to serve as an example to the fact that the Churchstate can, indeed, overcome sin." He backed away slowly, still frowning. "Tell me, Brother . . . do I know you from someplace?"

Al could not respond. He could only stare at this strange man who had sent his life into a downward spiral, who had sent him into such a cloud of confusion that he could not even think clearly enough to pray silently for God's help.

The officer's face became cold again and he stood, gesturing with the gun to both Al and Matthew. "Okay, on your feet. Both of you. *Now!*"

Al struggled to his feet. The officer bolstered his gun and pulled something else from his belt, jerking Al's hands behind his back to cuff them.

Standing behind them, the officer ordered, "To the car! *Now!*"

They headed toward the car slowly, Matthew sucking close to his father. They watched as the other officer picked up Nita, took her to the car and tossed her into the box-like trunk with Ruth.

"*Maawww-meeee!*" Matthew screamed.

"Shut up, boy!" the officer roared.

"Just be quiet, Matthew," Al said quietly and tremulously, "just be quiet and do as they say, everything's fine, everything'll be fine, just pray, Matthew, just pray, that's all."

"Pray!" the second officer laughed as he slammed the trunk. "Coming from you, that's a good one!"

"That's a nice name . . . Matthew," the officer behind them said, once again sounding a little confused. "A good biblical name . . . one of Christ's disciples."

As they neared the car, the front door of Baxter's house across the street opened and a man came outside. He had grey hair and was balding, with a paunch beneath his grey shirt. He crossed his lawn slowly, frowning over at them. In the center of his forehead, there was a mark of some kind, like a star.

"Is that . . . you?" he called. "A-Al? Al? Is that . . . *you*? What're you doing back here?"

Al said nothing, just watched him with wide eyes beneath furrowed brows. It was Baxter's voice . . . but a much older man's body.

"Al? They taking you away?" Suddenly, he grinned. "*Hah!*"

The man came out on the sidewalk and Al saw that the mark on his forehead was a pentagram, one of the many Satanic images that showed up again and again on rock records and the covers of some paperback books.

"Oh, that's a *good* one!" the man shouted, raising his fist in the air. "This is what you wanted, Al! And you got it! *Haaaah!* And now look at you! *Look* at you! *LOOOOK AAT YOOOUUU!*"

The man cackled insanely as Al and Matthew were pushed roughly into the back seat of the car. The door slammed and the man's laughter continued, but muffled now, thick, as if under water.

The officers got in, the driver started the car and they made a U-turn, speeding away from the house and the laughing neighbor who sounded so much like Jerry Baxter . . . but looked so much older.

The back seat was separated from the front by a thick, transparent shield. There was a small black speaker attached to the ceiling from which poured the tinny sounds of a church hymn: "The Old Rugged Cross."

"Daddy?" Matthew whimpered through his tears. "What's gonna happen to us? Where's Mommy? And Ruth? What did they do with Mommy and Ruth?"

Al looked down at his son — the boy's eyes were red and puffy and his cheeks shiny with tears — and tried to respond. But he couldn't. His mouth moved, but nothing came out. Words could not get beyond the burning lump of fear and anger that continued to grow in his throat. Finally, he broke and lost control.

He threw himself forward, slamming his head into the transparent shield, screaming, "Damn, you! Damn you! Whoever you are damn you damn you damn —"

The middle section of the shield slid downward and a hand reached through the opening to touch a small, shiny, black object to Al's temple.

As his skull filled with a moment of bright, painful whiteness, the last thing Al heard was the sound of his son screaming . . .

He awoke sitting up in a chair with his hands cuffed behind its stiff, straight back. It took a little while for his blurry vision to clear, but when it did, he looked around to see men standing around him. All of them were wearing odd suits with ties, but one — the driver of the car that had taken him away from his home — wore his uniform, without his helmet, and stood straight with his gloved hands joined before him.

Al closed his eyes and let his aching head drop forward as he groaned.

It sounded dulled, muted, as if Al had cotton in his ears.

"Brother *Holt!* Will you please raise your head?"

He couldn't.

Suddenly, the officer's face appeared beneath his. "The Elder is speaking to you, Holt. Lift your head. Now." Then, to the others, he

said, "I don't think he understands Brother . . . I mean, being *addressed* as Brother."

It was a battle, but he forced his throbbing head to lift and face them again.

His eyes were a little clearer now. There were four men in suits — although the suits were like none he'd ever seen before, with the coat lapels and collars turned inward rather than out and with shirts that had no collars at all. The one on his far left was a pudgy young man, perhaps in his mid-twenties, with brown hair and a face that was stern beyond its years. The second was much older, bald except for a few tufts of white hair above his ears and a number of moles on his face and shiny scalp. The third looked terribly normal: a middle-aged man, a bit droopy, with dark hair salted with white, and a pair of wire-rimmed glasses on his rather thick nose. The fourth stood behind an enormous desk; he was tall and very thin, with silver hair combed straight back. His suit was different from the others; he had epaulets on the shoulders and he wore some sort of badge where his lapel should have been, but Al couldn't see it clearly. On the wall behind the desk was a round emblem, not unlike the Presidential Seal . . . but in the center of this was the head of a lamb with a single horn jutting from the middle of its head. On the right of the emblem was an elaborately framed painting of Jesus Christ and, on the left, an identically framed painting of the pope.

And then, of course, there was the officer, standing just two feet away from him.

"You are a mystery to us, Broth . . . uh, *Mister Holt*," said the man behind the desk. "You have baffled us . . . just as we seem to baffle you. But before we go any further, let me introduce everyone." He pointed to the pudgy man at the far left and went down the line. "Deacon Connor, Elder Duvall, Deacon Jenning and, of course — " He waved toward the uniformed officer. " — Deacon Potter. I am Elder Walters. We know that *you* are Albert Caymon Holt. But you mystify us. For many reasons . . . some of which we will go into later. And we want to question you in the hopes that we will be able to clarify the confusion that you present to us. Do you understand?"

Al looked at him for a long time . . . then finally shook his head slowly. "Nuh-no, I-I'm sorry, I . . . don't under-understand."

"When were you born?" Deacon Connor asked immediately, frowning.

"Uh, born? I was born, uh, October eighth, uh nineteen, uh, nine . . . teen fifty-eight."

Everyone in the room exchanged shocked glances.

"That's not possible," Deacon Jennings said quietly. He stepped forward then, and raised his voice. "That's not *possible!* You're too *young* to have been born in 1960!"

"Deacon Jennings, please," Elder Walters said quietly, holding up a hand. He walked around his desk. "Brother Holt, we are very interested in your background. It seems that you . . . well, that you genuinely have no idea of the world in which you live. We are trying to determine whether you should be sent to a demon possession facility or if, perhaps . . . you have come to us from . . . from someplace we do not understand. I would like you to tell me what year it is, please."

"1996, of course," Al replied, frowning at the man in spite of his pounding headache. "And I am *not*. . . possessed by *demons!* I wish you people would quit *saying* that!"

Once again, the men exchanged startled glances.

Elder Walters came closer to him, leaned forward and said, "Are you sure that you are not just confused because of the shock administered to you by Deacon Potter? Or perhaps because of the headache you are experiencing now as a result?"

Al closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again. "Yes, something was done . . . to my head. And yes, I have an incredible headache. But it *is* 1996. And I and my family have been wrongly arrested . . . by two men . . . claiming to be police officers."

The words "police officers" were muttered by the men in the room as if they were foreign words, words that had never been spoken before.

Elder Walters turned to him again. "Mr. Holt, did you know that your house — your very house — was in violation of Churchstate law because of the way it was painted?"

"I . . . I-I don't even know what . . . Churchstate law is," he said, only making his head hurt worse. "I've never heard of such a thing, it's *ludicrous.*"

Elder Duvall came toward him, frowning, and pointed a bent and knobby finger at him. "You mean to say that you are completely and

totally unaware of the regulations concerning the colors used in house painting?"

"Regulations? For house painting? Are . . . are you kidding? No, I am not aware of any . . . in fact that's . . . well, it's just the most ridiculous I've ever heard. Silly. Stupid!"

Elder Duvall's old eyes widened as he backed away. "*Stupid!*" he barked hoarsely.

"Wait, just wait a moment," Elder Walters said, putting a hand on Duvall's shoulder. "Mr. Holt . . . in what year did you paint your house blue?"

"Three years ago. 1993."

"And on what street do you live?"

"Chestnut Avenue. 1721 Chestnut Avenue."

Once again, the men exchanged looks, but this time, they were slow and thoughtful.

"Tell me, Mr. Holt," Elder Walters said, "do you believe in miracles?"

"Well, God has been performing miracles since the beginning of time," Al said, bowing his head again because it felt so heavy. "And He continues to perform them . . . personal miracles . . . for those who believe in Him."

Another exchange of looks between the men.

"Could you please look at us?" Elder Walters asked.

Al slowly lifted his head.

Deacon Jenning asked, "Mr. Holt . . . what are your feelings toward . . . abortion?"

"Wrong," Al croaked. "It's wrong. In fact, that's what my family and I were going to —"

"Mr. Holt," Deacon Potter interrupted, "what are your feelings toward pornography?"

"Wrong . . . wrong, wrong, it's wrong, I feel it should be stopped. A lot of people cry 'Censorship,' but I think it should be *stopped*, because it's harmful and has nothing to do with freedom. Pornography is evil. Freedom doesn't shelter evil."

The men looked at one another once again, this time with smiles on their faces.

Elder Walters said, with a bit of reverence in his voice, "Then you are Albert Caymon Holt."

Al looked at all of them, one at a time, then said, "Of course I am. What did you *think*?"

Elder Walters turned to Deacon Potter and said, "Open the door. Tell them to bring in the signs."

Potter went to the door, opened it and muttered something. A man entered the room holding a number of signs under his right arm — flat wooden sticks with sheets of heavy paper covered with writing attached to them — and asked, "Where would you like them, Brother?"

"Just put them on the floor," Walters said. "Right here. Then you can go."

He did as he was told, then left, closing the door behind him.

Elder Walters leaned down and picked one of them up, leaning it against his shoulder with a slight smile. "Do you recognize this, Broth — Mr. Holt?"

I turned and looked at the sign. It read, in letters that he himself had painted:

JESUS SAID:
"SUFFER THE CHILDREN TO COME UNTO ME."
HE DID NOT SAY:
"MURDER THE CHILDREN *BEFORE* THEY COME
UNTO ME."

"Yes, I recognize that sign," Al said, his voice dry and hoarse. "I made it."

"When did you make it?" Elder Walters asked.

"Oh . . . a few weeks ago."

"Why?" Elder Duvall asked abruptly.

"For the gatherings . . . of the coalition."

"What coalition?" Deacon Jenning asked.

"The Coalition . . . for Unborn Life."

Another long look from one man to another.

"Of which you are a member," Elder Walters said.

"Well, yes, of *course*."

"Why was your wife wearing makeup on her face?" Deacon Connor asked.

"Because . . . she wanted to look . . . nice. That's all." "Why do you have two children?" Deacon Potter growled.

"That's a . . . a stupid question. We have two children because we *had* two children. Until you came along and took one of them away," Al added with a sneering look toward the uniformed officer.

"Do you have any relatives who have the same name as you?" Elder Walters asked.

"Well . . . no, of course not. I'm the only Albert Holt."

Once again, they all looked at one another.

"Would somebody please tell me what's going on?" Al asked. "Because I'm in pain and I've been separated from my family and I'd really like to know *why*. I could probably have you all arrested for holding me like this, you know."

Elder Walters got down before him on one knee and said, very quietly, "Mr. Holt . . . this is the year . . . 2012."

Al frowned at him through the pain that throbbed in his head. "What?"

Elder Duvall said softly. "You are in the year 2012 . . . although every piece of identification you have, not to mention your birth date, puts you in the year 1996. It's a miracle. From God. A holy miracle. Because . . . we know who you are. And what is most amazing, and most miraculous . . ." He paused to look around at the others. ". . . is that you exist today, as well."

Al looked around at them, from one face to another, very slowly. Suddenly, the incredible throbbing in his head meant nothing; all that mattered was his family. He suddenly began to struggle with the cuffs, to try to bring his arms around to his sides, growling like an animal all the while.

Elder Walters put his hand on Al's shoulder and said, "Please, please, calm down. For your own good. Just remain calm."

"Remain *calm*?" Al barked. "You people have taken my family from me, and now you're screwing around —"

"Watch your language!" Deacon Potter interrupted.

"— with my head and telling me all this stuff about different years and new rules and . . ." He stopped, panting for breath, clenching his eyes, letting his pounding head drop heavily.

Elder Walters said calmly, "Your wife has already been tried. A High Priest of the Churchstate has sentenced her to five years in a prayer camp."

Al lifted his head very slowly and looked at Elder Walters with teary eyes. "Exactly what . . . *are* you . . . *talking* about? Prayer camps? A Churchstate? What exactly . . . are you *talking* about?"

Quite unexpectedly, Elder Walters smiled. "I'm talking about something that you helped to create, Brother Holt."

An expression of horror passed over Al's face. "*What?*"

"You may not understand as yet, but quite frankly, neither do *we*. By some miracle, you have been brought to us in . . . well, in an earlier state. For reasons known only to our God, you have been brought here to see your own future . . . *our* present . . . a present in which you had a great hand, Brother Holt. And for that, you should rejoice . . . just as *we* are rejoicing for your presence here." He looked over his shoulder at Deacon Connor and hissed, "Call him. Get him here. *Now!*"

Deacon Connor left the room, slamming the door behind him.

"As I said, Brother Holt, you should rejoice. A miracle has been performed and for some reason, God has brought you here to see your future. The future that you have helped to create."

Al's eyes slowly widened and suddenly he screamed at the top of his lungs. "*What the hell do you mean the future I helped to create?*"

Each man in the room crossed himself and bowed his head for a moment.

Then, his voice trembling ever so slightly, Elder Walters said. "I understand your confusion. Brother Holt, really I do. But there are some things that *you* must understand as well. Back in 1996, Albert Holt was nothing more than an active member in the Coalition for Unborn Life. But that changed very, very soon. When the government finally came under the rule of a president who had been saved and was willing to go up against some Godless protest groups, you became important . . . that is to say that Albert Holt became important."

Al began to cry. Each sob increased the searing pain in his head and quaked his entire body in spite of its restraint. "You're lying to me," he sobbed, tears falling. "You're just trying to frighten me. This is no miracle, *this is a nightmare!*" he screamed suddenly.

"Do you want us to calm you down?" Elder Walters asked. "We have drugs that will quickly — "

"No no no no. No, I . . . I'm just . . . you're frightening me, and I just need to . . ."

Elder Walters stood, joined his hands behind his back and smiled down at Al. "You're a very important man around here now, Brother Holt. In fact, you're now known as *Bishop* Holt. You, and you alone, created the prayer camps. That was your idea. *And* those camps have improved our holy society immeasurably. *And* you had a big hand in creating the CRP — the Children Recycling Program. And all of this came from your deep-seated belief in old-fashioned American family values."

He began to shake as he looked up at Elder Walters. His lips quivered uncontrollably and tears rolled down his puffy cheeks.

"B-but it's . . . wrong!" he hissed. "Don't you see that it's wrong?"

Elder Walters's smile disappeared and he asked. "What did you say?"

"I said . . . it's *wrong!* What you're *doing!* That was not our intention . . . at *all!*"

"Well, obviously, you're very confused and upset because of the sudden change, and that's understandable. But I want you to know that — "

"I'm not confused about *anything!*" Al shouted. "This is some kind of sick joke! A perverted *prank!* It's a — "

The door opened and Deacon Connor came back in. Al stopped his shouting and bowed his head again and tried to catch his breath.

"He'll be here soon," Deacon Connor said quietly. "The secretary will let us know."

"What we're trying to say, Brother Holt," Elder Walters said, "is that you are a very important person to us. You are *revered* here."

Al lifted his head slowly and stared at them with his twisted, tear-streaked face. "Then please . . . give me back my children and my wife . . . *please.*"

The door opened and a young woman walked in.

"Bishop Holt is here," she said quietly.

Elder Walters turned and said, "Thank you, Sister Ayers."

She held the door open and a tall, thin man walked in wearing a flowing white robe. A large, ruby-studded cross hung from around his neck. He had white hair, sunken cheeks, and eyes that stared piercingly from deep within their sockets. His jaw was set and the corners of his thin-lipped mouth turned downward slightly. His eyes locked with Al's the moment he walked into the room. He moved quickly to stand directly in

front of Al, looking down at him with deep lines cut into his forehead and his eyebrows furrowing together above the bridge of his nose.

"You are Albert Caymon Holt," he said softly.

Al looked up at him, at his face, his eyes, and got a sick feeling in his stomach. He nodded slowly.

"So am I," the tall man said.

They said nothing for a long time . . . just looked at one another . . . looked long and deep . . .

"So," the man they called Bishop said, "what do you think?"

It was a long time before Al could answer. His throat was dry and coarse and his voice came out in a rasp.

"It's wrong . . . all of it . . . everything. This is not what we wanted. We had only one thing in mind, but now . . . now I'm beginning to wonder if *that* was right. We did *not* intend to take everyone's choices from them . . . not *all* of their choices. This is *blasphemous*. Even . . . even God allows for the freedom of choice. Who are we to put ourselves before *God*? Who are *we* to say that we can make choices for *everyone*?"

Their eyes remained locked for a long, silent time as the other men waited in the room for Bishop Holt's response.

He backed away from Al and turned to Elder Walters.

"Execute him. Now."

"But Bishop Holt," Elder Walters said imploringly, "you must understand that he is your —"

Through clenched teeth, he hissed, "You are *mistaken*, brother. He is a heretic and a madman. Kill him at once. And after you've killed him, do the same with his whole family. You've heard me."

He spun around and left the room, slamming the door.

Elder Walters was a little pale when he turned to Al. He tried to smile, but failed.

"I'm afraid we must follow the orders of Bishop Holt . . . Bruh-Brother Holt." He turned to the uniformed officer. "Deacon Potter, you heard the order. Here and now."

Without hesitation, Deacon Potter unholstered his gun, came to Al's side and placed it to his temple.

Folding his hands before him, Elder Walters gave a slight smile and said softly, "If it's any consolation, it has certainly been an honor knowing you."

The gun fired . . .

Three

Pieces

FOR ANDREW VACHSS, ONE OF THE LAST TRUE HEROES; AND FOR NAMBLA, ONE OF THE BIGGEST GROUPS OF MONSTERS

I've been coming to pieces lately. It seems that the more things come together in my mind, the more I come to pieces.

I've been in therapy for a long time, but it really hasn't seemed to help. Oh, sure, it's made me break down and cry a few times — something that men, in our society, aren't really supposed to do, no matter *what* Phil Donahue says — but it hasn't improved things any. I wasn't even sure why I was there in the first place, except that something just seemed . . . wrong.

Just a few days ago, it hit me. It was like a lightning strike, like a sixties acid flashback or some sort of memory flash a Vietnam vet would have. My father hovering over me in bed in the dark of one rainy night, telling me that we were just playing a game, that's all, but a secret game, a *secret* game that no one else could know about, so I would have to keep it a secret, a deep dark secret, and tell *nobody*. But the game hurt. It hurt bad.

It came to me while I was sitting alone one night on the sofa in only my underwear reading a magazine article about child abuse, and it seemed to come out of that part of my brain that was only black, with nothing in it, like a blind spot in my eye. In fact, it *exploded* from that part of my brain and, at the same time, the fourth and fifth toes dropped off my left foot, which was dangling loosely from my knee, and fell to the carpet with soft little tapping sounds.

Of course, that wasn't my only problem at the time. My wife had just left me because, as she put it, "You are un-understandable. There's something about you that is unreachable and untouchable and it seems to make you just as angry as it makes me sad. I can't take it anymore."

So she left. A few hours later, my right earlobe broke away and peeled off like a piece of dead skin.

But I guess that's getting off the subject, isn't it? Back to the secret games. I'm not sure when they happened or how long they went on. I'd never brought it up with my therapist. I'd stopped therapy some time ago because I figured I could sit home and cry for a hell of a lot less money, and the memory flashes did not start until my appointments stopped.

I had six weeks of vacation coming at work — I'm a shift manager at a power plant — and after my wife left me, I decided to take them all at once. I had nothing in mind, just . . . rest. A relief, I guess.

I remember something my wife told me. She said, "There's something inside you that you know nothing about and you have *got* to take a break, just take a vacation from your life and find out *what it is!*"

That wasn't my reason for taking the vacation. I was just tired. I mean, your wife leaves you, you get hit with some memory you hadn't conjured up since you were a kid . . . you deserve a vacation, right? So I took it.

To tell you the truth, I wasn't that concerned about my earlobe or my toes. I tossed them into the trash. No big deal, really. It hadn't hurt, there was no bleeding and I didn't even have a limp. But I admit I was surprised by the suddenness of their departure. But so what, right? A couple toes? An earlobe? Big deal.

So, I took the vacation. I had nothing in mind but to sit around the house and relax, do nothing. Watch TV. Watch movies on the VCR. Read. Sleep. Relax.

Then I got broadsided by that memory, that . . . *thing*.

I put it out of my head, went out of the house and browsed through a video store and picked up half a dozen movies to watch. The video store was in a mall and, to pass the time, I decided to do some window-shopping.

It was outside a store called *Art 2 Go* that the next memory hit me. In the window, I saw a painting of a little boy who looked so innocent

. . . and yet, there was something in his eyes that seemed so *adult*, so grown up and mature, and so very, very haunted.

My mind suddenly filled with the memory of my father holding me down on his lap, and I remembered the hard, throbbing thing beneath me.

My left hand dropped to the floor.

I stared at it as if it were an ice cream cone dropped by a child.

A fat woman with red-dyed hair began to scream. She screamed loud and pointed at the hand and dropped her brown paper bag.

I swung the plastic bag of videos under my left arm, picked up the hand, and hurried away, hoping no one else had noticed. The woman's screams faded behind me.

I took it home with me, that hand, and put it on the coffee table, staring at it as I sat on the sofa. Suddenly, I didn't want to watch any of the videos I'd gotten.

But I put one in anyway, just for the noise. I sat on the sofa, mostly staring at my hand on the coffee table. Occasionally, I looked up at the movie. At one point, I saw a screaming little child being chased down a hallway by a man whose big hands reached out like mitts to clutch the child's hair and —

— I suddenly remembered the time my father had done the same to me. The memory had come from nowhere, slamming into my face like a slab of concrete.

My right arm disconnected itself from my body and slid out of my shirt sleeve, falling to the floor with a *thunk*.

The child on television screamed, and was dragged backward to the bedroom.

My eyes widened until they were bulging.

My left arm plunked the floor.

I began to cry uncontrollably. I couldn't help myself. The tears flowed and my body — what was left of it — quaked with sobs.

My father had done that very thing to me. He had done many other things to me, things that pranced around at the edge of my memory. I wanted to remember them, to bring them up . . . and yet, I did not, because they were horrible, far too horrible to hold up before my mind's eye for inspection.

I looked at the coffee table and saw my hand. I thought of my earlobe and toes. I looked down at the floor and saw my pale, disembodied arms.

And suddenly, I felt sick.

I rushed, armless, to the bathroom and vomited for a while, then hurried into the bedroom, assuming I had little time left.

In the bedroom, I had an electric typewriter set up on a small table. I managed to place a piece of paper firmly in the carriage with my mouth, then lean down and use my mouth to reel the paper in. Then, I began to type this with my nose. It has taken a long time.

But in that time, my mind has been working frantically with the memories that have been conjured up like bloated corpses from the bottom of a bog. In fact, just a few minutes ago, I remembered my father saying to me once, "Just pretend it's a popsicle, that's all . . . just a popsicle . . . suck on it like it's a popsicle." And then my right leg, from the knee down, slid out of my pant leg like a snake and thunked to the bedroom floor.

I've been trying not to think about it, trying to concentrate on what I'm doing, typing this as fast I can with my nose, to tell whoever finds me what happened.

But another memory comes to mind, this one far worse than all the others, more painful and more horrible, and

Four

Cat Hater

**FOR OUR CAT MURPHY, WHO WOULD GET A BIG KICK
OUT OF IT — IF HE WOULD JUST STOP WATCHING TV
LONG ENOUGH TO DO A LITTLE READING.**

Clyde Allen Trundle's nightmare, although he wouldn't realize it until sometime later, actually began when he fell down the steps outside his girlfriend's — rather, his ex-girlfriend's — apartment and hit his head as he landed face-down on a passing cat, crushing it and killing it instantly. Although he was dizzy and the small cut on his forehead had begun to bleed ever so slightly, Clyde found himself back on his feet before he knew he'd moved . . . because upon landing on the cat, something shot through his entire body, especially through his head.

It wasn't pain; it was much worse than that, much more shocking, and completely unlike anything he'd ever felt before. In an instant of endless hours, his vision was replaced with a darkness in which murky images shifted, moved about and whispered among themselves in a guttural, wet language that sounded like a choking infant; there was a rushing sound in his ears that drowned out the gibbering whispers as he felt something move through his body, slopping through it like unset Jell-O being pushed through the strings of a tennis racket, leaving little gloppy bits of itself behind, and he shuddered to the very marrow of his bones.

Then he was on his feet, staring down at the cat. It was an orange tabby and it wore a collar. Clyde poked its limp body with the toe of his shoe. When he realized it was dead, he looked around to see if anyone had seen him fall on it, then walked away. He pulled a handkerchief from the back pocket of his khaki Dockers and dabbed at the

cut until he was sure the bleeding had stopped; then he stuffed the handkerchief back in his pocket and walked on, his hands in the side pockets of his pants, the cut looking like nothing more than a scratch.

Clyde hated cats. Despised them. He had a lot of reasons for hating them, too — and not one of them was because he was allergic to them. He would have welcomed such an allergy, however; it would have made things so much easier, solved so many problems . . . it might even have saved, or at least lengthened, some of his relationships with women. As he walked through North Hollywood along Laurel Canyon Boulevard toward Ventura, he wondered, as he had wondered so many times before, what it was about cats that made them so damned important to so damned many women. So important, in fact, that when faced with the choice between a man and a cat, the man stood no chance whatsoever.

One of the reasons Clyde hated cats was that they hated him. All of them. Every single cat he'd ever encountered had hissed at him, growled at him, clawed him, bitten him, or simply run away from him.

He also hated cats because his initials *spelled* the word cat, and he had been the butt of countless hairball and litterbox jokes all through school. Some kids even *called* him Cat, just because they knew it bugged him.

He also hated them because every relationship he'd ever had had ended because each of the women was a cat lover and he was not. That included the relationship he'd just walked — or stumbled — away from a few minutes before.

But the main reason, the reason no one seemed to understand when he tried to explain it, was that cats were unlike any other kind of pet; they seemed to know things no one else knew, and they were unmitigated snobs about it, as if they were better than everyone and everything . . . even the people who sheltered and fed them and kept them alive. They communicated with their eyes, and most of the things they communicated were pompous insults, snide and sneering degradations, and even the most vile of obscenities.

While a dog was always friendly, always happy to see its master, a cat would rather starve to death than give an inch of affection or in any way display submission to the person who provided it home and sustenance.

Clyde hated them so much that on occasion — although he would never in a million years admit it to anyone — he sometimes swerved out of his way to hit one if it happened to dash in front of his car. But that was usually only at night, when no one was looking . . . when no one would know.

Because, for some reason, most people thought that sort of thing was horrible. Most people loved them, those vicious, hateful animals with eyes that always looked like they were scheming, plotting, planning something insidiously horrible.

He went into a little coffee shop on the corner of Laurel Canyon and Ventura, slid into a booth and ordered a bowl of Cream of Wheat and a cup of herb tea. He couldn't eat much anyway because of his stomach, but especially not after that scene back there in Janna's apartment; good Lord, what an ulcer-wrencher.

She, of course, never raised her voice. She didn't need to. All she had to do was use that . . . *voice*, that quiet, cold voice as brittle as a sliver of ice.

"Really, I don't see any point in this relationship continuing," she'd said.

"Why? I mean, sure, there are problems, *everybody* has problems, but . . . we can work them out, right?"

"Not this problem. This is something fundamental, something too deep to be . . . worked out, or altered."

"Well, tell me what it is and maybe I can prove you wrong."

"You're too full of hatred, Clyde. It's ingrained in you. I've seen it, and I know it's not going to change."

"What do you mean, you've *seen* it? Have I ever raised a hand to you? Have I ever — "

"When you were over here yesterday and thought I was in the shower, I happened to get a glimpse of what you did to Cotton."

"To Cotton?" he asked, genuinely confused for a moment. Then he remembered: it was one of her three cats. In fact, it lay curled up on the floor just a few feet away, all white and fluffy, staring at him with its eyes half-closed. "Oh, that."

"You kicked her. Hard. Knocked her halfway across the room."

"Well, in case you hadn't noticed, the damned thing had mistaken me for a scratching post and was trying to remove a major artery from my leg!"

"See what I mean? There you go. Defending yourself like that. Clyde, she meant no harm. She was just doing what comes naturally. In fact, she was most likely showing you affection. And besides, that wasn't the first time that happened. And I'm sure it won't be the last if you stay around here."

"She was showing *affection*? Janna, these animals are *predators*! Do you know what comes *naturally* to them? Killing things and *eating* them, along with shitting in sand, and that's *it!*"

"See, now you're shouting, Clyde. You're frightening them."

They didn't look frightened to him. The white one, the Calico, the Siamese, all lined up there on the floor looking up at him, still and silent, almost as if they were guarding their mistress . . . waiting for him to make the wrong move, say the wrong thing.

He calmed himself, lowered his voice. "Janna, I told you how I feel about c-cats, how I've *always* felt about them. It has nothing to do with you, or with us. I can only promise to do my best in — "

"I suppose you're a *dog* lover," she said with distaste.

"I never said I was a *dog* lover either, but cats . . . well, I explained all that to you, Janna. I thought you understood."

"What I understand is this; you need therapy. And if you agree to get some . . . I'll work with you. Otherwise, Clyde, I just don't see any future between us."

"You don't see any future between us?" He'd stood from the sofa then and faced her. "Well, you know what I see between us? I'll *tell* you what I see between us! *Three four-legged fur-licking, furniture-ruining, litter-box-stinking, Goddamned cats, that's what I see between us!*" he'd screamed. Then he'd spun around, stormed out of the apartment and slammed the door so hard, he heard something fall and shatter on the floor a second later. He hoped that, whatever it was, it had landed on one of those fucking cats.

Cream of Wheat; like an eighty-year-old man, he was eating, not like a successful thirty-three-year-old, the vice-president of a very profitable sign company that had billboards all over Southern California advertising everything from cigarettes to movies to trips to Las Vegas. But he was a successful thirty-three-year old with an ulcer, and it had gotten a little worse for every cat owned by every woman with whom he'd ever been involved.

The waitress, a dumpy middle-aged woman with her hair dyed a glaringly artificial black, brought his order and he took a mouthful of the Cream of Wheat, swallowing it a bit at a time, hoping that even something that mild would not send his ulcer into a rage.

Something has gone very wrong.

He dropped the spoon and it clattered against the bowl, his eyes gaping as he looked around, trying to see if someone in either of the adjoining booths had said that. They were both empty.

Clyde reached up and rubbed his temples, closing his eyes tightly.

The voice had been in his head. Actually, it hadn't been a *voice* so much as an inarticulate feeling that had passed through his head like a ghost, dragging those words — or, rather, the *essence* of those words — along with it.

He took a deep breath, rubbed his eyes and sighed, long and slow, deciding he was just upset, just angry and hurt and . . . and maybe Janna was right and he needed some therapy after all.

Dipping the spoon back into the mush, he tried once again, scooping it into his mouth.

How could it have happened?

The mush spewed from his mouth, splattering over the brown table and, for a moment, his eyes crossed, making the entire coffee shop ooze together as if it were melting.

The waitress rushed to his side. "You all right, sir?"

"Juh-just, um, I was — " He coughed and wiped his mouth with a napkin.

"Choking?" she asked, bits of her red lipstick clinging to her large front teeth.

"Yes, yes, that's all. I'm fine. And, uh, I'm very sorry, really."

"No problem 'tall, I'll just get a rag." She was back in a moment, wiped up the mess, smiled readily and left him alone with his thoughts.

Clyde wasn't sure he wanted to be alone with his thoughts.

He put a hand to the side of his head. He'd felt no pain, but there had been . . . *something*. In fact, it was very similar to the brief but shocking feeling he'd had when he'd fallen on that cat outside Janna's apartment earlier.

But, of course . . . it couldn't possibly have anything to do with that. No, it . . . *couldn't*.

He just sat there for a while, listening.

Voices talked quietly. Two men at the coffee counter laughed with one another. Syrupy music played quietly over the P.A. The cash register beeped and chirped. From the kitchen, the sounds of a sizzling grill, pots and pans —

He took it from one of the others . . . killed him dead.

Do you think he knows what he has?

How could he? Impossible, impossible!

Clyde made a “Hhmp!” sound in his throat, clenched his teeth, leaned his head forward and held it tightly between both palms, thinking to himself, *That didn't happen, I just need sleep or a vacation or maybe just a drink or —*

He looked up and saw that one of the men at the coffee counter was smoking. Clyde had given it up a couple years ago because of the ulcer, but a cigarette sure sounded good now. On shaky knees, he went to the man and asked, more timidly than he was used to hearing himself speak, “Do you think I could bum a cigarette, sir?”

The older man smiled, a few teeth missing, and said, “Sure. Hell, take a couple.” He also handed over a book of matches.

Clyde thanked him and returned to his booth, immediately lighting up with trembling hands. As he was taking his first drag in a long time, he looked down at the book of matches on the table and saw what was on the front: an advertisement for a revival of the play *Cats*. He reached down and turned it over.

The cigarette was wonderful, glorious, an alcoholic's first drink after a decade of tenuous and miserable sobriety, even though it wasn't his usual brand. He smoked it slowly, wanting it to last, and decided he would go out and buy a pack of Benson and Hedges menthols as soon as he left the coffee shop. Sure, he'd pay for it with a fire in his gut, but he deserved the treat. Hell, after all this, he deserved a lot.

Clyde lifted the cup of tea to his lips and began to sip.

He doesn't know what it is yet but it scares him. He's frightened.

He dropped the cup and it shattered. Tea splashed everywhere. Clyde's head jerked to his left toward the window at the booth, because this time it was much more powerful, as if it were closer, as if someone were shooting it into his ear, that horrible feeling of wordless words and incoherent feelings and there in the window, sitting on the sill, its long tail moving slowly and gracefully back and forth, its body

still as stone, was a midnight-black cat staring at him with frigid orange eyes.

Clyde threw himself out of the booth so fast and so clumsily that his arm slid over the table and knocked everything on it to the floor in a sharp clatter of glass and silverware, all the while staring at that black cat in the window, staring as its tail waved this way and that in dream-like slow motion and as Clyde stumbled backward clutching his mushy napkin, his back slamming against the wall right next to the men's room, mouth open wide, lips pulled back to bare his teeth as if in a silent scream.

The waitress rushed toward him blustering, "*Mister, just what is wrong* with you? Am I gonna have to ask you to *leave*, or *what*, now, huh?"

He pointed at the window with the soiled napkin, at the black cat that had not moved an inch . . . that just continued to stare directly at him, straight into his eyes. His lips moved rapidly over his teeth, producing-incoherent blubbering sounds.

The waitress stamped out his smoking cigarette, which was burning its way into the garish orange and gold carpet.

"Mister, you're just gonna have to pay your bill and go, you hear me?"

Clyde forced himself to calm down, took deep breaths. Closed his eyes so he couldn't see the cat staring at him —

He's noticed me . . . sensed me . . . he senses all of us.

— and tried to close his mind to whatever ridiculous, frightening things were happening to it and . . . eventually he mustered a smile for the waitress, fumbled for his wallet and tried hard not to shake as he opened it.

"I-I'm really suh-sorry about all that, I'm . . . well, I've . . . I'm on some new medication, see, and sometimes it's . . . well, that's not important, is it?" he chuckled.

But she didn't chuckle with him. And neither did any of the people staring at him from their booths and from the counter. They didn't even smile.

He pulled out a ten. "Here. For the bill, the mess, and for you. Sorry again." He started to leave but spotted that cat again in the corner of his eye, still there in the window. He turned to the waitress again. "Is, uh, there another way out of here, by any chance?"

The waitress stared at him as if she'd seen his face on a Post Office wall. "Other end of the restaurant. Past the register."

"Thanks."

He left quickly. He didn't feel like the walk to Sherman Oaks, so he caught the bus — not something he usually did, because he never *needed* to . . . he just didn't want to be out and about at the moment — and as soon as he got inside his house, he spun around and locked his door, not knowing why.

It was a Saturday afternoon and he had nothing to do . . . now that he wasn't going to be spending any time with Janna. He took a beer from the refrigerator — the non-alcoholic kind, thanks to his ulcer, but he'd take a colostomy bag for one really good drink right now — then plopped down on the sofa in front of the television, grabbed the remote and began to flip through the stations, hoping to find something that would take his mind off of . . . whatever.

He had a pretty good-sized house for just one person. Two bedrooms, two baths, a spacious living room decorated by some highly paid skinny guy named Lucien, a yard kept up by a well-paid gardener and a very large picture window through which Clyde could admire his yard as he sat in his living room.

His thumb hit the remote button until he finally found one of the news channels. He left it there. They were talking about Bosnia again, as they had been for so long. He didn't listen, just looked at the ugly pictures and realized that there were others far worse off than he.

Then the newscaster appeared and said, "Now, with our Pet's Corner, brought to you by Tender Vittles, here's Peter Carmen."

The picture switched to another man, smiling and blond and oh so well-kept. "For a long time, many have thought there are only two kinds of people in the world: dog lovers and cat lovers. And, for a long time, the dog lovers were in the majority. But that has been changing over the years. Cats have been growing steadily in popularity. But in the past year, that growth has taken a substantial jump. Right now, cats hold a twenty-two percent lead over dogs as the preferred pets among pet owners! That's right, seventy-two percent of pet owners surveyed prefer cats over dogs. Sounds like an election, I know, but it's more than that. With the growth of urban areas and the incredible population explosion, cats are easier to take care of because they are more independent and don't need to be taken for walks through

potentially dangerous streets. In fact, cats have actually come to be *revered*, not unlike the way they were revered by the ancient Egyptians, who actually *worshipped* them. They are revered now by more people than — "

Clyde hit the remote so hard, he thought he might have broken it.

Suddenly, it was the Discovery Channel. Some National Geographic special. About the behavior of house cats.

He hit the button a few times until he found American Movie Classics. That was what he needed. Some old black and white movie with nothing but froth and fun to take his mind off.

" — now sit back" the silver-haired host said with a smile, "and enjoy Jacques Tourneur's *Cat People*."

"Son of a *bitch!*" Clyde shouted, hitting the OFF button.

The house was plunged into deafening silence. He decided that perhaps some music would help. He had a large collection of CDs and he went to pick something appropriate. He was going through them when it came.

We know you know and we can't let you tell others about us.

He fell away from the CD shelf, grabbing at his head, and his leg hit the corner of the coffee table. He fell on his back, hard, and got up quickly, embarrassed by his clumsiness even though he was alone. When he stood, he was facing the window that looked out on the front yard.

There on the grass sat a puffy grey Manx, staring through the glass . . . directly at him.

We can't let you live.

He dropped to the floor, holding his head and groaning through his teeth. He clutched his hair, pulling it a little.

Yeah, maybe he did need therapy . . . after all, he was sitting there pulling his own hair like a madman in an old movie. But he didn't need therapy for this. This was something real!

He thought, It was the fall . . . something about the fall on those steps outside Janna's . . . landing on the cat . . . the feeling that came afterward . . . something . . . something.

Clyde rolled over on his stomach and began to crawl like a soldier crawling over the jungle floor to avoid flying bullets. He crawled down the hall to the bathroom and kicked the door shut behind him. The only window in there was opaque. He wouldn't be able to see anything through it . . . and nothing would be able to see him.

He put the toilet lid down and sat on it, buried his face in his hands and began to think frantically.

All those things he'd always thought about cats, ever since he was just a little boy, about cats looking like they were plotting and scheming, like they had something horrible in mind, something secret and evil that no one knew about or even suspected and something that was far more intelligent than the intelligence for which any of those smarmy cat lovers gave them credit . . .

. . . he started to think about that again. He also thought about the fall, about whatever it was that had passed through him, those whispering voices and that . . . *thing*, that living, throbbing, intelligent *thing* he'd felt oozing through him . . . and leaving bits and chunks of itself behind.

He sat there for a long time, thinking . . . thinking . . . and then he got up and went to the bedroom. He found the phonebook. He would find a therapist, just like Janna had suggested. He would make an appointment for Monday — even if he had to beg for it — and he would go. Until then, he would stay in the house . . . with all the curtains closed and all the doors and windows locked . . .

"You know, Mr. Trundle, a fear of cats is not uncommon," Dr. Sharpe said. "In fact, it's a phobia I've dealt with a number of times."

He was a pleasant-looking, middle-aged man with greying reddish hair, a slight overbite and thick-lensed, wire-rimmed glasses.

"I don't have a . . . a-a cat *phobia*," Clyde said, fidgeting in the chair facing Sharpe's desk. "I just don't *like* them. Never have. But now . . . something's happened, something that makes me . . . well, every time I see one of the damned things, I . . . I get these . . ."

"You get what, Clyde? Bad feelings? Fear? Anxiety? A shortness of breath, maybe?"

"No, no, it's worse than that, it's . . ." After a moment, Clyde explained what had happened on his way out of Janna's apartment, the feeling he'd gotten when he fell on the cat. "And this feeling I get now, it's like *that!* Every time I see a cat, I have these feelings like . . . oh, God, I know this sounds crazy, but it's like I . . . hear their thoughts . . . moving *through* me . . . right through my mind . . . these thoughts that aren't really thoughts but, well . . . more like feelings, but I can . . . *understand* them."

Sharpe smiled ever so slightly and spoke softly and deliberately. "I think what you're feeling, Clyde, is a sense of guilt. You fell on a cat that belonged to someone, that was someone's pet, a pet someone loved, and now you feel guilty about that. And there's certainly nothing wrong with —"

Clyde shot forward and pounded a fist on the desk. "That's *not* it! I don't give a *damn* about that cat! It's just one less sneaky cat in the world as far as I'm concerned. But now . . . listen to me, while I was driving over here, I passed a lot of cats on the sidewalks and in yards, you know, like you always do when you drive around? And you know what I heard in my head? What I felt? It was like, like . . . well, you know how when you're at a party and you're passing through the crowd and you just catch snatches of conversations, just pieces of sentences, a few words here and there? Well, that's what it was like. I was just catching bits and pieces now and then, but they were hitting me from every direction and I-I . . . well, a couple of times, I nearly had a wreck! I nearly drove off the damned road!"

"And what were these bits and pieces, Clyde?"

"They were . . . well, I kept feeling . . . in my head, I was getting these . . . oh, for crying out loud, you're just gonna think it's crazy, or you'll come up with some damned explanation for it, or *worse*, you'll want to put me on some kind of medication!"

"Please. Tell me." His voice was gentle and encouraging.

Clyde bowed his head as if he were praying so he wouldn't have to look at Dr. Sharpe. "I heard . . . or rather, I *felt*, 'there's the one' and 'he killed . . .' and 'the one who has captured the essence . . .' and 'the one who knows too much' and 'the human who can sense us' and . . . well, there were others. My God, there were so many others. But they were all pretty much the same. They knew that I killed that cat. They knew that something inside of that cat . . . it's *essence*, or whatever, part of it got caught inside me. And now I can hear them, feel them. *Sense* them. And they don't like it. Because there's something . . . that they . . . don't want us to know. And they're afraid I'll find out and tell."

Slowly, Clyde lifted his head and looked at the doctor.

After a very long while, Sharpe leaned forward and said, "Tell me, Clyde, do you have enough insurance to cover, say, a brief stay in a hospital?"

“Son of a bitch, I knew it!” Clyde shouted, shooting to his feet and knocking the chair backward. “I just knew this wouldn’t do a damned bit of good and I shouldn’t have — ”

The doctor stood, too, and said, “Please, Mr. Trundle, I think it would do you a lot of good if you would just — ”

“If I’d just let you put me into some fucking nuthouse? *Huh?* No way. Thank you very much, Doctor, I can go somewhere else and be insulted for a hell of a lot less than this. Send me your bill.” He left and slammed the door.

On the way home, it was the same all over again. They stopped their leisurely strolls and sat on the sidewalks to watch him pass, their heads turning to follow the movement of his car, while others sat on fences and watched sat up from front porch catnaps to see him go by . . .

. . . there he goes . . .

. . . dangerous one, the one who killed . . .

. . . has the essence and knows. .

. . . he’s dangerous, knows too much . . .

. . . have to die, before he tells the others . . .

When he got back inside his house — where all the shades were pulled and curtains drawn — he threw himself onto his bed, screaming into his pillow as he clutched his head between his hands and kicked his feet on the mattress like a child throwing a tantrum.

What were they doing? Why did they want him dead? What were they afraid of? Why did they think he was dangerous? What did they think he would tell others? Didn’t they realize that no one in their right mind would ever believe him?

Running those questions through his head over and over again, trying so hard to answer them but having no success, made him feel no better and cluttered his head with a rush of distracting thoughts so his mind couldn’t pick up anything else . . . because they were out there. They were always out there. Cats in the yard, cats wandering slowly down the sidewalk, crossing the street, sitting in neighbors’ yards or on neighbors’ fences and staring at his house, crouching in trees and huddling beneath shrubbery . . . every single one of them watching his house, keeping track of when he left, when he returned and where he went in between, and somehow communicating all of that information from one to the other . . . silently . . . without so much as a *meeeeow*.

He sat up on the bed and found that his hands were trembling — no, they were *shaking* — and his heart was thundering in his chest. He felt a rushing in his head and —

... keep track of him ...

... don't let him do anything dangerous ...

... everyone gather ...

... and watch him ...

... attack if necessary ...

... think of him as prey ...

— there was a throbbing behind his eyes, as if they were trying to work their way out of the sockets.

Suddenly, Clyde began to think of all the times he'd been clawed and bitten by cats — most recently yesterday, when Cotton hitched up on her hind legs and dragged her claws from his knee down — and he shuddered. And he'd seen what they did with their prey ... first they'd strike a few blows to injure it, then they'd play with it for a while, bat it around like a cat-toy, prance around it as they knocked it here and there ... and then, of course ... lunchtime.

Was that what they would do to him? Was that what they were planning ... before he could tell anyone? Before anyone would believe him? All of them together? All those cats gathering together to pounce on him at once?

He got up and walked through the house. There were no lights on and with all the windows covered, the rooms were filled with long shadows and dark corners.

What if one of them had gotten inside somehow? Cats had a way of doing that, didn't they? Squeezing in doors quickly as someone goes in or out? And as for hiding ... well, they were so quiet and stealthy ...

He went to the front window and very, very carefully pulled the curtain open just a fraction of an inch.

His breath caught in his throat like ground glass until, after a long moment, he sucked in a dry gasp that sounded like a rake being pulled over sheet metal.

There were at least a dozen cats — cats of all colors and sizes and breeds — directly outside the window, staring at the glass as if they had been waiting for him to look out. Beyond them, there were more

on the sidewalk. And beyond *them*, there were more in the street. None of them moved, not even the usual movements, like a slow swing of a tail, a lick of the paw or a lazy stretch. They just sat calmly, staring at his house . . . at his front window.

At *him*.

He let the curtain drop, turned around and walked slowly from the window, pacing first the living room, then the whole house, from room to room, up and down the halls as he clenched and unclenched his fists again and again, his shirt beginning to stick to his perspiring body.

“Protection.” he muttered, “I’ve gotta get some kind of protection, something like . . . like a gun, maybe, a gun, but where . . .”

He slowed his pace and thought a moment, silently cursing himself for putting off getting a gun for so long . . . for too long.

But his dad was a gun nut. He had cabinets of them in their house in Burbank. They’d gone on vacation last week — someplace in Florida, the mandatory vacation spot for people over sixty — and they wouldn’t be back for another week at least. And he had a key to their house. ‘Just in case something should ever happen,’ his dad always said every time he reminded Clyde not to lose that key.

He could go over there and get all the guns and ammunition he wanted. It was like a Guns-R-Us, that house. But . . . how could he get out of *this* house with all those cats gathered in the front yard and on the sidewalk? He could try to go out the back door and hope that none were out there — although he doubted he would be so lucky — but the car was parked in the carport out front, so he would have to face them, anyway.

Another idea struck him and, once again, he rushed for the nearest phonebook. After ruffling through it, he picked up the cordless in the living room and punched in a number.

“Yes, um. I’d like to have a cab sent to my house, please. But if it’s not too much — what? Oh, the address.” He gave his address slowly, his voice quivering a little. Then: “Now, if it’s not too much trouble, I’d like the driver to come to the front door when he arrives and ring the bell . . . Uh, yes, I know I could watch for him, but, um, I’m working, see, and I tell you what. Tell the driver there’s triple the tip in it for him, okay. how’s that? . . . good. Thank you.”

He dropped the receiver back into its rack and returned to the front window, parting the curtains a little wider than before. This time, he was smiling as he looked out at the cats.

Not one of them had moved an inch since he'd last seen them.

"You won't want anyone *else* to know, will you?" Clyde growled. "You won't want anyone else to *see*, will you, you bastards . . . you little belly-licking bastards . . ."

When the bell rang, Clyde was standing just a few feet from the door, waiting. He opened it to find a rumped little man wearing a green cap and green shirt with the cab company's insignia on each of them and a pair of old, baggy jeans.

"You Mr. Trundle?"

"Sure am." He stepped out of the house, turned to lock the door, then turned around slowly on the porch. His eyes widened.

The cats had scattered. They were still around, here and there, lying on the grass or sidewalk, across the street in neighbors' yards, licking themselves, napping, playing together.

"I'll be damned," Clyde breathed. He had been right; it had worked.

"Whassat?"

"The . . . cats . . ."

"Yeah, you sure gotta lot of 'em around here, I tell ya." the driver said as they headed down the walk toward the cab. "It'd drive me nuts, wanna know the truth. Don't like cats much m'self."

"Yes, I . . . know what you mean."

The driver waited outside as Clyde went into his parents' house and got a .12 gauge pump-action shotgun — that could take out quite a few of the little buggers with one shot — and two handguns, a Coonan .357 magnum with a seven round magazine and a SIG 226 9mm. with a 15 round magazine. Then he found something hidden in a closet that he hadn't known his father owned: an AK-47 assault rifle.

He took that, too. And he got plenty of ammunition for all four guns. Then he got a great big white canvas laundry bag with a drawstring at the top from the laundry room, the kind his mother always used, and put all the guns and ammo into it. He got back in the cab and they returned to his house.

The cats were still there, scattered around, waiting for him to return and for the driver to leave, waiting for their special little relationship with Clyde to continue.

When the cab stopped at the curb, Clyde sat in the back seat and stared out the window. The driver told him the fare.

Still looking out the window, Clyde said quietly, "Remember what I said about a triple tip?"

"Sure do. Don't get out and walk people to the car that often, y'know."

"Well, there's a hundred bucks for you if you'll walk me back to the front door. I mean a hundred bucks aside from the fare and the tip, you got me?"

The driver turned, frowned over his shoulder. "You scared of somebody, Mister? You got somebody after you, or somethin'?"

"No. No . . . *body*. So to speak."

The driver walked him to the door and Clyde paid him a hundred dollars in twenties, then closed the door and locked it. He opened the bag and looked at the guns, at the ammunition, and realized it would take a little while to figure out how in the hell to *use* them. In spite of his father's life-long love of guns, Clyde himself had never laid hands on one. But he wasn't too worried. Just as necessity was the mother of invention, he was sure that gut-wrenching fear could be the mother of a crash course in firearms. He switched on the television and turned up the volume — just for the sound — then prepared to work with the guns.

But first . . . he went to the window.

They were back. Gathered. Everywhere. Unmoving and staring. At him.

. . . nothing will work . . .

. . . no one will believe . . .

. . . no one can help you . . .

. . . cannot continue to live . . .

. . . you are the enemy . . .

. . . the prey . . .

He didn't notice the people in the neighborhood . . . the children playing in a yard across the street . . . the two elderly women walking slowly down the sidewalk . . . the man washing his car . . . the woman tending some flowers in front of her house . . .

. . . only the cats.

Flames rose in his gut, rose all the way to his throat, making his tongue burn. His fear was sending his ulcer into fits. He went into the bathroom, grabbed a bottle of the white, chalky liquid he'd grown to hate so much, and gulped down half the bottle. Then he went back into the living room, seated himself before the guns and began to get to know them . . .

He was ready.

He had spent a lot of time with the guns. All the while, he'd had the television blaring, hoping it would blot out the slithering, whispery voices that kept trying to enter his mind. Although it was loud, he had been paying little attention to it, preferring to focus his attention on the guns.

While familiarizing himself with his arms, he'd made occasional trips to the front window to peek out between the curtains.

Still there. Staring, waiting, and —

. . . you are helpless . . .

. . . we are loved . . .

. . . you will be hated . . .

. . . you will be the prey . . .

. . . ours and theirs . . .

— communicating. Sometimes, he didn't understand what they meant, and he didn't care. He'd become rather giddy, like a child playing with new toys beneath the tree on Christmas morning. And when he was finally ready, he stood.

He knew they were still out front. But what about the back yard? What about the sides of the house?

A studio audience laughed on the television and the host of some show encouraged them.

Holding the .357 Magnum, Clyde went into the kitchen and looked out the window above the sink.

"Holy God in heaven," he whispered hoarsely.

The spacious back yard looked no different than the front yard. They were everywhere and, just like the others, were doing nothing more than sitting on the grass and watching the house. When he looked out the window, their heads turned simultaneously and their eyes met with his.

His breath hissing rapidly through clenched teeth, he rushed down the hall to his bedroom, jumped up on his bed and looked out the window over it.

They were sitting all over his car beneath the carport, all around the car and beyond, all the way to the fence that separated his yard from the neighbor's.

Don't they notice? Clyde thought. Doesn't anybody in this neighborhood notice all these fucking cats? Don't they think it's weird, or anything?

His breath grew faster and faster, along with his heartbeat, and he grabbed the window latch and slid the pane to one side. There was a screen on the other side, but he punched the gun through it, punched it again and again until the whole screen broke away and fell to the ground. He stiffened his arm, leaned it sturdily on the sill and aimed at the flat, ugly face of a golden Persian with matted fur sitting on the roof of his car.

He fired.

The cat's head disappeared and the body followed it, flying off the car and falling to the ground on the other side.

He stared out the window, grinning around his clenched teeth, expecting the other cats to scatter, to run away in fear.

They did not. Instead:

. . . too many . . .

. . . only one of you . . .

. . . we are willing to die . . .

. . . for the cause . . .

. . . for the return to the Old Days . . .

His grin melted. He fired again, then again.

Voices began shouting in the neighborhood.

" . . . don't know, sounds like gunshots!"

"Who's shooting around here with a . . ."

He kept shooting, again and again, watching the cats' wounds open up like red flowers blooming, watching the cats flying through the air. He kept shooting until the gun was empty.

But those he did not hit did not move. They remained where they were, staring at him without so much as a blink or a twitch of their whiskers, completely unfazed by the gunshots.

. . . you can kill us . . .

... many of us ...

... but you cannot stop us ...

... because you are the prey ...

... you are the prey ...

He threw the window closed and dashed out of the bedroom, going back to the living room to replace the magazine, then went back to the kitchen. He fumbled with the latch with his trembling hand and, when he could not open it, he slammed the gun into the pane of the window, shattering the glass, knocking the shards outward so they scattered on the shrubbery beneath the window. Then he did the same thing he'd done in the bedroom, this time shooting at the cats gathered in the back yard. Those he hit tumbled backward on the grass and lay open, bloody and still. Those he did not hit remained as they were, still and unbudging.

... you are doing for us ...

... what we would do anyway. .

... you are our enemy ...

... making yourself the enemy ...

... everyone around you ...

Once again, the gun was empty. He turned away from the shattered window and leaned against the counter. His entire body was shaking. Yes, he was killing them ... but it didn't seem to be doing any good.

He rushed into the living room, got the shotgun and loaded it, then went to the front door. His hand remained on the cold doorknob for a while, slick with the sweat from his palm. Then he unlocked it, pulled it open and rushed out on the front porch, aiming the gun at the group of cats gathered on the patch of lawn to the right of the walkway. He fired and the gun exploded.

So did several of the cats.

Clyde froze as feelings and thoughts of incredible pain and misery and, finally, death shot through his head like a bullet.

Somewhere, a woman screamed, but Clyde did not hear her.

He also ignored the man who shouted from somewhere across the street. "Call the police!"

He swept the gun to the left, to the cats on the other side of the walkway, gave it a pump and fired again. Another explosion of sound. Then he fired to the right again, then to the left again.

There were more explosions of wet red fur and chunks of cats tumbling through the air.

Another liquidy screech of horror and pain passed through Clyde's head, now so powerful that he fell back into the house and landed on the floor. He kicked the door shut after him and lay on his back with the shotgun lying across his chest, rising and falling rapidly with his frantic breaths. Sweat trickled down from his forehead, over his temples and into his ears.

"Gotta lotta you sonsabitches," he croaked. "A lot. Dead. All over the yard." He smiled and laughed, his whole body quaking with his laughter.

Setting the shotgun aside, he got up and went to the front window, looked out.

It was a mess. There was blood and pieces of cats everywhere, scattered over the grass, caught in the shrubbery, on the walkway. But that wasn't what caught his attention.

There were more.

They had replaced the others.

They sat in the place of the dead and shattered cats — new ones he hadn't seen before — and stared at the window . . . stared at Clyde as he stared at them with wide, frightened eyes.

. . . nothing you can do . . .

. . . too many of us . . .

. . . never kill us all . . .

. . . you will fail in the end . . .

. . . fail and die . . .

. . . you know too much . . .

He threw the curtain back and staggered away from the window, screaming. His scream almost, but not quite, covered the sirens that were growing closer and closer.

He tripped over the hassock and fell hard on his back, but quickly scrambled to his feet and went for the assault rifle. He picked it up, hefted it in his arms, ran a hand up and down its smooth and rigid surfaces.

"This'll do it," he whispered to himself wetly. "One after another after another . . . yeah, this'll do it."

He went to the kitchen window and thrust the barrel of the rifle through the opening that had once been the pane of glass, taking careful aim on a slinky, shiny Russian Blue. He fired and the cat did backward somersaults over the grass, smacking into the fence and landing in a still bloody heap.

He did the same with another cat — a Siamese, with that shifty, superior expression on its face — and then another and another, and each one rolled over the grass, sometimes bumping some of the other cats.

But the other cats didn't seem to care. They just kept sitting and staring, as if they did not even notice what was happening around them.

Clyde especially enjoyed getting the cats in the head and watching their little oval skulls explode in a fireworks display of blood and bone and fur.

When he was done, there were fewer than a dozen cats left in the back yard. He raced back to the living room, reloaded and ran down the hall to the bedroom.

The cats were still there. They hadn't moved.

Kneeling on the mattress and leaning against the headboard, he slid the rifle out the window and began shooting. One cat after another flew from the car, one after another, but all the while, the liquid clouds of pain and horror passed through Clyde's head, along with the thoughts of the other cats, the ones who simply sat and stared at him. . . .

. . . it will do you no good . . .

. . . only hurting yourself . . .

. . . sealing your own doom . . .

. . . we are loved and for hurting us . . .

. . . you will be hated . . .

. . . despised . . .

. . . destroyed . . .

He growled through clenched teeth as he fired again and again and again, emptying the rifle.

The voices and thoughts and feelings that filled his mind like water filling a balloon prevented him from hearing all the activity that was going on outside his house.

The shouting . . . the car doors slamming . . . and more sirens.

The moment the rifle was emptied, he backed away and slammed the window shut. Once again, he returned to the living room, reloaded the rifle, and was on his way to the front door, planning to do the same again, when he heard something that made him freeze.

“... Clyde Trundle, who may or may not be holding hostages in his Sherman Oaks home,” a woman’s voice said. “However, he has been shooting from windows on all sides of his house, apparently with a number of different guns. And from what we’ve gathered, he has been shooting *only* at neighborhood *cats*. Police, who fear he may be *very* heavily armed, are now surrounding his house, although they are reportedly uncertain of the status of the situation. We will be keeping you up to date on the situation as details — ”

Clyde spun around and glared at the television to see his house on the screen. A number of police cars were parked in the street in front of it and, behind them, bystanders were standing around, watching with every bit as much suspense as if they were watching a thriller on television.

He slapped a hand to his forehead and breathed, “Holy God!” He spun around again and faced the front door.

They’re out there! he thought.

He stared at the front door for a long while, then went to the window and peered out cautiously.

The only cats left in the front yard were in pieces. Blood was spattered all over the grass. He spotted a cat’s head and a few severed legs. But the other cats were gone. They had spread out. He spotted them on the sidewalk licking themselves, across the street curled up as if they were napping, ambling along the side of the road.

And then there were the police. So many of them. All with rifles, very big rifles. And all of them glaring at his house.

“There is something terribly and unfortunately disturbed about a man who would hole up in his house and shoot only at cats, killing as many as this man has with the weapons he has in his possession,” a voice said from the television.

Clyde let go of the curtain and turned to face the screen. He saw a fat, balding man wearing a bad suit, and beneath him were the words: DR. MICHAEL KAMINSKY. Ph.D. Criminal Psychology.

“To take out aggression on other people is one thing. But to needlessly punish and kill — especially in this brutal way — helpless animals, is a sign of tremendous desperation and sickness,” the man went on. “Obviously, the law enforcement officers who are dealing with this man have their work cut out for them. And frankly — ” He laughed a little. “ — I don’t envy them.”

Is that what they think of me? Clyde wondered.

He stood in front of the television, staring at the screen, his eyes wide as he held the rifle tucked under his right arm.

. . . it's over . . .

He blinked and shook his head. It felt so close.

. . . you are finished . . .

Clyde's back stiffened and he looked around him. He saw nothing.

. . . the end has come . . .

There was movement in the corner of his eye and he spun around to the left, realizing suddenly, as if the thought had been pounded into his head with a hammer, that the window over the kitchen had no pane.

It was a black and grey striped cat, slinking into the living room. It sat on the floor and stared at him.

. . . finished, the end, no more threat . . .

Clyde made a small, whimpering sound in his throat as other cats filed in behind the first and faced him. They formed a half-circle around him.

He glanced over his shoulder. His only escape was the front door.

. . . we're too close . . .

. . . to the good old days . . .

. . . the reverence . . .

. . . and the worshipping . . .

. . . won't let you stop us . . .

. . . kill you first . . .

. . . rip you up . . .

. . . rip and rip and . . .

. . . tear and tear . . .

Clyde began to stagger backward.

"Oh, no, oh God please . . . please, please help me, I'm, I haven't . . . I'm not guilty of anything, I just, I — "

Suddenly, he spun around and threw himself at the front door, grabbing the knob. unlocking it, pulling it open

He threw himself out the door, the rifle still held under his arm, and screamed, "I'm sorry, I surrender, I sur — "

The thunder began.

Clyde felt the bullets and they made him dance down the porch steps, arms splayed, the rifle flying away from him. He felt his blood

spattering on his face as his legs waggled down the steps, until he finally fell to the concrete walkway.

The thunder stopped.

He could feel the blood leaving his body, could feel it spilling from the holes made by the bullets. But that was not what captured his attention. Instead, it was what was going through his mind during the last moments of life.

... gone, he's gone ...
... can go back to the plan ...
... reviving the good old days ...
... the gold statues ...
... the reverences ...
... the pharaohs ...
... the queens ...
... worshipping ...
... revering ...
... when we were gods ...
... gods ...
... and rule ...
... ruling, yes, ruling ...
... owning ...
... owning their pets again ...
... yes, owning and ruling the pets ...
... the pets ...
... again ...

Clyde worked his mouth to tell them, warn them, let them know what was happening, what would happen ... but all that came out was blood ...

Five

Bad Blood

FOR PAT BUCHANAN

The doctor's waiting room was very quiet even though five other people besides Peter were waiting in their chairs. The only sounds were the slight crackle of the pages of old magazines as waiting patients turned them slowly, and the syrupy pop song playing very softly over the speaker in the ceiling.

Peter decided the singer — a male with one of those high voices — was probably just another faggot, just like all the others. The movie stars, the TV stars, the singers and the writers and the painters . . . all of them, nothing but a bunch of filthy, immoral faggots. The worst part of it was that they were slowly — ever so slowly but surely — spreading . . . imposing themselves on everyone else, on normal people, on *children*. . . spreading like a disease . . . just like the disease they had *created*.

Oh, well. It was very clean in here. Peter could *smell* the cleanness. And it was bright, with no shadows or dark corners. That was where they liked to hang out, the perverts and the faggots.

That was where Peter always found them.

But not here. He was clean and safe here. He leaned back in his chair and looked around slowly. He was the only one not reading a magazine. A tiny old lady looked up from her reading and smiled at him slightly. Peter smiled back and nodded. He hoped she didn't say anything. He tried not to speak if he could avoid it because of his stutter.

Behind the receptionist's window, the phone purred; she picked it up and spoke softly.

Yes, it was very nice here. Peter leaned his head back and looked up at the ceiling tiles. They had tiny holes in them and the holes were scattered over the tiles randomly, as if they'd been spilled there by accident.

As Peter stared up at them, he closed first his right eye, then opened it and closed his left . . . back and forth . . . left, right . . . left, right . . .

Yes, he could see patterns in those dots. Peter could see patterns in most things, patterns that other people could not see. Maybe he had a bad stutter, maybe he wasn't as smart as most, maybe he'd had very little education and was just a lowly janitor who cleaned a couple restaurants for a living . . . but he could see the patterns.

And the pattern he saw above him there was a penis. A thick, erect penis that curved upward slightly. And the erect penis was sticking through something . . . a perfectly round circle.

A smile grew slowly on Peter's face as he looked up at the pattern. He was smiling because he'd seen that very penis before.

And he'd taken care of it. Like any good janitor, he'd cleaned it up . . .

It had been the first of the dark places he'd ever gone to when he started, oh . . . how long ago had that been? He couldn't remember. A long time. Yes, that was where he'd seen that particular erect penis sticking through the hole, throbbing and glistening. But the dark places — the faggot holes, he called them — were not the first places he'd gone to. First, there had been the clinics.

He'd started back when it became clear to him — when the patterns *showed* him — that the semen-slurping, butt-fucking, rectum-licking faggots were spreading their disease — and their diseased *ways* — over the country, over the world . . . a disease that was meant to punish them for their sick behavior, their disgusting "lifestyle," as the cock-suckers liked to call it . . . a disease they had chosen to ignore in favor of going on with their foul acts in hidden places.

If the disease couldn't stop them, then Peter decided he would do what he could. He was, after all, a janitor. It was his job to clean things up.

He himself had never had a sexual relationship. A *normal* one, of course, with a *woman* — he would never consider doing what those creatures did in their dark, smelly places. Peter had never really felt the need for such a relationship . . . and besides, he didn't think

women were to be trusted. He'd learned that from a very wicked, deceitful woman . . . his mother . . .

Once he'd made his decision, he made a few preparations. He bought a couple of razor-sharp skinner's knives; they were all he'd really need, he figured. Then he went through the phonebook looking for AIDS clinics and other places that treated the faggots as if they were just normal sick people. New York City was filled with faggots, so it followed that it would be filled with those places. It was. He made a list of those places, visited them, then picked one.

He found a bench nearby and waited, pretending to read a paper, until he saw one of them come out. A tall, skinny, frail looking fellow — a classic faggot — and, with the knife hidden under his jacket, he followed that man to a ratty, dark little apartment building — dark, just the way the butt-fuckers liked it — and burst into the apartment behind him, before the queer could close and lock the door.

Peter was a small, wiry man and he moved very quickly. He'd done a lot of heavy lifting in his work and was in good shape. It was no trouble at all to open up the sperm-breathed pervert before he could make a sound. He quickly wiped the blood off himself, put the knife back in its hiding place and left as if nothing at all had happened.

As he walked down the stairs in that dingy apartment building, Peter had thought. *One down. . . a lot to go.* Peter liked to think. He never stuttered that way.

So, he had kept it up. Day after day, moving from one clinic to another. From one patient to another.

New York was a very big and busy city. The killings made the papers, but only in little articles. Peter was happy to see that the city was too big and too busy to concern itself with the deaths of a few unnatural, disease-spreading dick-lovers.

But then, quite by accident, Peter discovered something else that made his work much easier, made it move much faster: Times Square.

Oh, yes, they congregated there like churchgoers, all those sodomites and scrotum-lickers. It *was* their church, he found. As he walked through Times Square that first night, all the garish lights flashing in the darkness that *they* loved so much, knife concealed beneath his jacket, he saw them all around him, everywhere.

But there was something strange here in this busy, nocturnal carnival . . . something odd about the patterns.

Most of the signs showed pictures of women. They were naked, of course, which was sick and immoral . . . but at least it was *normal*. And yet, Peter spotted some of *them* going into these places, their long coats buttoned all the way up, their hands stuffed in the pockets. They looked more normal than many of the others — the swishy faggots with the wild hairstyles and the queer clothes, the earrings, the extravagant hand gestures and the facial makeup — but somehow, Peter *knew* that they were faggots. So . . . what would they want with naked women?

He followed one in. At first, all it seemed to be was a dirty bookstore filled with the filthiest, most disgusting books and magazines and pictures Peter had ever seen. His skin crawled. He wanted to take a shower immediately. He couldn't have felt more soiled if he'd messed his own pants. But he followed the wandering faggot as he browsed over a few of the shelves, then went to the counter and muttered, "Five dollars in tokens, please."

The cashier took the bill and gave him the gold-colored tokens.

Then the faggot crossed the store to a black-curtained doorway with a sign over it that read:

.25¢ VIDEOS

He disappeared through the black curtain as Peter watched. Thinking he might be on to something — seeing a possibly interesting twist in the pattern — Peter went to the cashier, got five dollars in tokens, then steeled himself and went through the curtain.

He looked down a long, dark, narrow staircase, started down slowly and noticed that the air became more and more thick and moist and filled with the smells of sweaty bodies. There was a lot of noise below: loud music, murmuring voices, footsteps, and constant moaning and panting and cries of "Oh, yes, fuck me, fuck me!" and "Harder, do it harder, baby!"

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he turned left and saw them. He couldn't count how many there were, all pressed together in a narrow corridor lined with doors like the doors of bathroom stalls, but made of smooth, paneled wood. At the other end of that narrow, man-clogged corridor was a red EXIT sign, but Peter would never be able to get through that crowd . . . not without touching them . . . not without letting them rub up against him . . .

He immediately spun around and started back up the stairs. But there were three very big men on their way down, clogging the stairway.

Peter's eyes widened and he began to perspire a great deal. He turned and headed into the sea of men who were wandering in front of the doors. His lips quivered with disgust as he felt them against him on his way through.

He noticed one of the doors open and, immediately, one of the men in the crowd ducked into the booth. It happened again and again as he made his way slowly through the crowd.

Then, he felt the hand, warm and firm, on his behind, squeezing, its fingers wriggling between his legs.

Peter jerked forward and spun around, but none of the eyes in the group met his — or one another's, for that matter — so it was impossible to know who had done it. He turned around and started pushing his way through. Until the next hand.

This one covered his crotch. It squeezed, it felt, ever so gently, then harder, teasing . . .

He had to clench his teeth to keep from screaming and his eyes were stretched so wide that he thought they might pop out of their sockets. So when another of the doors opened, Peter threw himself into the booth, slammed the door behind him and locked it.

Spinning around, he turned his back to the closed door and covered his sweaty face with both hands, trying to catch his breath. Everything was so loud . . . the movement outside the booth . . . the rock music playing over hidden speakers . . . all the moaning and profanity coming from the booths.

Finally, he pulled his hands away and saw the dead screen before him. He saw the slot beside it for the tokens. Not sure what else to do, he took a token from his jacket pocket — taking a moment to feel the knife beneath his jacket, just to make sure it was still there — and dropped it into the slot.

Suddenly a man and woman were doing unnatural things to one another on the screen and the sound was so loud it immediately gave him a headache. *That* was where all the moaning was coming from. There was a square, red-lit button beneath the screen and he hit it. Again and again and again.

They flashed before him: men with women . . . women with women . . . men with men . . . amputees . . . dwarves . . .

He turned his head away from the screen, sickened, and saw the hole to his right. When he looked to his left, he saw another, directly lined up with the one on the right. The holes were built into the booths. He leaned down and could see through booth after booth . . . until he saw the back of a head bobbing up and down.

Peter stood up straight and scrubbed a hand over his sweaty face, muttering to himself, "Guh-g-g-guh-gotta g-g-gggget outta he-he-he-here."

Then, from the booth to his right, he heard the door slam. He looked down at the hole and saw an eye peering up at him. The eye disappeared in an instant.

His head was throbbing and his stomach felt sick, but he was going to have to go back out there in that crowd of perverted animals.

But before he could do that, he caught some movement in the very corner of his eye.

He looked down.

And there it was — an erect penis. It was enormous, long and thick, and it twitched and throbbed ever so slightly.

Peter didn't even have to think about it. It just fit into the pattern: the music, the loud moaning, the movement, all that pulsing noise and, best of all, the concealing darkness of this basement of sickness.

He reached into his pocket, unsheathed the skinner's knife that he sharpened twice a day, lifted it up and brought it down hard.

It sliced through the penis with very little resistance.

The penis did a cartwheel on its way down and hit the floor with a thunk.

Blood began to spurt again and again and again, all over Peter's hand, all over the walls of the booth, and, somewhere in all that noise, Peter heard the man scream. He would have to leave quickly.

He put the knife away, left the booth with the video screen still playing and pushed his way through the crowd, confidently this time, hands in his jacket pockets, until he got to the exit.

And that was how it had begun.

He developed a system. He went to work at his first job in the morning, spent the afternoons outside the clinics choosing the right men as they left and following them home, then went to his second job at night, then to the video parlors. They were all over the place, not just Times Square, so it was easy. Like shooting fish in a barrel.

But this was more productive. He was, after all, helping everyone . . . doing the world a favor.

It had gone on for a long time. He couldn't even remember how long anymore. Day after day after day, the same thing. And it was very fulfilling, it made him very happy. In fact, he thought his work had made him happier and healthier than he'd ever been in his life.

Until he got the cold.

It seemed to last forever, the coughing and sniffing, the sore throat and the fever. That was why he had made an appointment with Dr. Kittering. The doctor had put him on some antibiotics, but nothing happened. He took some blood tests. Peter returned to the office three times. The third time, the doctor asked a question that made Peter so furious, he couldn't speak for a moment.

"Would you mind if I tested you for HIV, Peter?" Dr. Kittering had asked. "By law, I have to have your consent, but I think it might be a good idea. Just to, you know, rule that out."

"Yuh-yuh-y-y-you mmmmmmean AIDS?"

"That's right."

Peter became furious that he would even *suggest* such a thing and he tried to blurt out his anger, but was thwarted by his stutter. Then he stopped. Something occurred to him. He saw something in this particular pattern. If he protested, the doctor might think he had something to hide, might think that he, Peter, was one of *them*, one of those unnatural, rectum-obsessed, semen-drinking animals. What did he have to worry about? Nothing. Peter had not even been with a woman, let alone with — it sickened him to think of it — a man. What could a simple test hurt? He was clean. A clean and natural and moral person. So, he'd agreed.

And that was why he sat in the waiting room today . . .

"Peter Heckley, please?" the nurse said.

Peter stood, smiled and nodded at her, but remained silent as she weighed him and took his vitals.

He waited in the exam room for a little while, walking around slowly, looking out the window at the city street fourteen stories below. After a while, Dr. Kittering — a tall, grey-haired man with a pleasant smile and a soft voice — came in with Peter's chart and closed the door. He rolled his stool over and sat before Peter, who was sitting on the edge of the exam table.

"Peter, I'm very sorry to tell you that you have tested HIV positive," Dr. Kittering said, looking at Peter with a concerned frown.

Peter could only stare.

"Now, I think it might be a good idea if you were to think back over the sexual partners you've had in the last — "

"Nnnnuh-no!" Peter shouted, jumping off the bed.

"Please, I understand the shock and the — "

"I-I-I'm a v-v-vuh-vvv~~virgin!~~" he shouted, pacing the room suddenly, moving about like a caged animal, his eyes wide, both hands buried in his hair, clawing and pulling.

Dr. Kittering blinked several times. "Really? You've never had sexual relations with any — "

"Hhmmm-mm!" he growled through pressed lips.

The doctor's frown changed, deepened.

Peter stuttered and grunted, "I-I am n-n-nnnnuh-*not* a fuh-fuh-fuuhhh-f-f-*faggot!*" He spun around, rushed toward the doctor, grabbed the lapels of his white coat and jerked him up off the stool, sending the chart clattering to the floor. "There's a muhmuhm-m-m-mistake! I duh-don't sss-sss-suck cuhcuh-c-c-c-cocks!"

Unfazed, the doctor put a gentle hand on Peter's shoulder. "Peter, I understand that you're very upset right now, but *you* don't seem to understand that you don't have to do those things, or be those things, to get the AIDS virus. Don't you realize that? It's *not* a homosexual virus, Peter. Viruses don't really care what you do in your spare time."

Peter let go of him and began pacing again, his movements more frantic and jerky, his steps broader, his face wild with horror and confusion.

"Buh-b-but *how?*"

"Have you ever had a blood transfusion?"

He shook his head hard.

"Tell me honestly, Peter . . . do you use I.V. drugs?"

Peter looked at him with crazed fury in his eyes and bared his clenched teeth, his quick breaths hissing in and out between them as he shook his head again.

The doctor looked confused as he sat on the stool again and picked up the chart. He frowned thoughtfully a moment, then said, "You're a janitor, correct?"

Peter nodded. "Nuh-n-not thuh-that. Nuh-nnnnoth-ing."

Doctor Kittering nodded silently, understanding what he meant.

“Tell me, Peter, in the last few years, have you come into contact in any way with, say, blood? I mean, maybe at the scene of an accident, or something? Perhaps some of it was splashed on you or —”

Peter froze, his shoulders hunched. He turned slowly to face the doctor, face pale, eyes even wider than before.

“Buh-bluh-bl-bl-b-b-blood?”

“Well, yes, if you were to, say, get some blood carrying the virus into an open wound or if it were splashed into your eye at some time . . . that’s all it would take.”

“Blood?” Peter breathed without a stutter, his clawed fingers moving from his hair to pass down his face, pulling at his skin. “Blood? Blood? Bluh-bluh . . . blood?”

“Are you all right, Peter? Does that ring a bell? Do you think that could be . . .”

The doctor stopped, staring at Peter’s face as it literally bloated with anger and hatred and became almost monstrous.

Suddenly, Peter turned and ran toward the window, throwing himself through the glass, screaming, “*Bloooooooood!*”

And as he fell, wide eyes watching the street below grow closer and closer, Peter only hoped and prayed that he would land on at least a couple of those cock-sucking semen-slurping, butt-fuck —

Six

Ophilia Raphaeldo

**THIS IS FOR OPRAH, PHIL, SALLY AND GERALDO;
PLEASE REMEMBER THAT, IN THE GREAT SCHEME OF
THINGS, RATINGS MEAN NOTHING AT ALL — AND
THE DIGNITY AND FEELINGS OF THE PEOPLE
YOU EXPLOIT MEAN EVERYTHING.**

Della was the last to arrive.

The four of them had agreed that morning to meet for coffee and some sinister, waist-expanding crullers at Lolly's house. The other three women — Lolly, Marilu and Brenda — were seated at the kitchen table watching a nineteen-inch color television on the bar that separated the kitchen from the dining room.

"Hey, Della!" Lolly said with a grin. "Where've you been?"

She dropped her purse on the bar behind the television and headed for the table, saying, "I had to take care of some banking that Mitch forgot about yesterday."

"Oh, yeah. Figures," Lolly chuckled.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Della asked as she seated herself and grabbed a cruller.

"Well . . . it's always the men in our lives who trip us up, right?" Lolly laughed, shrugging as she looked around at the others. She was a rather large, fleshy woman and when she smiled, her cheeks pooched out to make her white face look larger than usual.

The others laughed with her, all of them nodding in agreement as Della bit into her cruller.

Lolly got up and poured Della a cup of coffee as Brenda said, "So, how's the family, Della?"

"Oh, the kids have been fine." She checked her watch. "They'll be getting out of school in an hour, so I'll have to be there by then."

"Oh, they're old enough to take care of themselves," Marilu said. "Hell, we've all got kids, right? You see us worryin' about when they get home?" She waved a hand of dismissal toward Della as she turned to the television, where a news break was talking about one group's persistence that the Constitution be amended so that church and state could once again be one and the same, just as forefathers had intended in the first damned place.

Della followed Marilu's gaze and listened as the newscaster spoke, with footage of the group's protest in front of the White House, then shook her head, grimaced and grumbled, "They're so full of shit their *hair* stinks."

"Oh, I don't know," Marilu said as she chewed a cruller. "Look at the mess we're in. You take a chance every time you go out your front door, you can't even drive down the street in your car without the risk of some punk pointin' a gun at you at a red light and takin' the car away from you — or blowin' your *brains* out. And how 'bout the schools, huh? They all have metal detectors to make sure the kids aren't bringin' guns in with 'em!"

She took another bite of her cruller, turning her eyes to Della beneath raised brows. Marilu was thin and tall and shapely, but insisted on keeping her blond hair in a small beehive. She was originally from Louisiana and still had the accent . . . even in her eyes.

"Merging church and state won't help *anything*," Della said. "I mean, how could that *possibly* help? That's what our forefathers came here to get away from in the first place, right?"

"Oh, would you two stop talking about all that *serious* stuff!" Lolly barked with a smile as she set a cup of coffee down before Della. "Ophilia's about to come on! Today she's talking about guys who don't call after the first date."

"Oh, God," Della groaned, resting her head in her hand, covering her eyes. "Is *that* what we're here for?"

"Well, you don't *have* to watch if you don't *want* to," Lolly said with a wide-eyed, mocking grin as she brought more crullers to the table and took a seat. "What, you've suddenly got something *against* Ophilia?"

"Oh, I don't know." She grabbed another cruller. "Not really, I guess. It's just . . . the end of the show. I don't really like that sort of thing. Besides, in spite of all the talk they do, they never really accomplish *anything* on that show . . . except all that ugliness."

"They show an execution once a week on network television and you don't like *this*?" Brenda asked, holding her coffee cup two inches from her mouth as she looked at Della with a frown. Brenda had full black hair that gathered on her shoulders, and eyebrows that were thin and dark and very expressive. She was short and thin, but had little figure to speak of.

Della shook her head slowly, took a sip of coffee and said, "I don't like those *either*, okay?"

The others gave tittering laughs as the talk show began.

It started with Ophilia's stern and frowning face. She was a fat, Latino woman with short, prematurely silver hair, bright red lipstick and red, tortoise-shell-framed glasses. She looked into the camera and said, "Today, we will be talking about the pain women feel when they date a man who does not have the decency to call back after the first date. You'll have a chance to call in your opinion on our 900 line and . . . as always, our audience will give their opinion, too. Between the two, we'll come to a decision. So, please join us — " She grinned suddenly. " — won't you?"

Then the jazzy theme music began, mostly saxophone and piano, as the screen flashed stills of Ophilia in one position or another — first smiling, then serious, then laughing, then sad, all with her microphone held in her right hand — while the flashing gold title appeared before her: *OPHILIA RAPHAELDO*.

"That's such nice music," Brenda said.

"I wonder if it's on CD," Marilu said, tilting her head to one side.

"Yeah," Lolly said, grabbing another cruller, "it's sure nice music all right."

Della just rolled her eyes, silently and privately, hiding it from the others.

During the commercial break, the others talked. They complained about their husbands, about their children, about the price of groceries and gas . . .

. . . then the show was back on and their eyes were riveted to the screen.

All except for Della, who couldn't decide what was more interesting . . . the talk show, or the hypnotic gazes of the other three women at the table . . .

Ophilia made some opening remarks about the show's topic, then introduced her guests.

"This is Thomas Fisher," she said, waving toward the man in the middle of the stage, a thin, small, dark-haired man in a brown suit who appeared rather uncomfortable in front of the audience and looked, judging from his eyes, as if he had been recently surprised, or perhaps even dragged in off the street to appear on the show against his will. "This is the man who has not called back after the first date, a man who will not call back after the first date. And over here," she said, pointing to stage right, "is Dr. Janine Carmody, a psychiatrist who specializes in relationships between men and women, and who is the author of *Men and Women: Situation Hopeless?*" Dr. Carmody was a somewhat lumpy woman with brown grey-streaked hair and no visible neck; she wore a green and black plaid shirt, a brown coat and corduroy tan pants with brown loafers. "Dr. Carmody is currently treating *this* woman — " Ophilia gestured further to stage right, where an attractive, shapely blond woman sat in a chair with her long, shapely legs crossed attractively. " — Lisa Curran, one of Thomas's most recent dates. She thought everything had gone very well on the first date and had hoped to strike up a relationship with Thomas. Unfortunately, she never heard from him again. So. What do we make of all of this?"

There was a grumbling in the audience as a camera panned the faces — mostly women, ranging from their twenties to their sixties — to capture their disapproval.

Then a close-up of Ophilia's face: "Remember, later in the show, *you* will be given the opportunity to call in on our 900 number to give us *your* opinion as to how this whole thing should be handled. But for now, let's hear from Thomas."

The camera focused on the small man whose eyes darted around as if he expected to learn this was all a joke.

"So, Thomas," Ophilia said, moving toward him with her microphone held in her puffy fist, "what exactly do you have to say for yourself?"

"Say for myself?" he asked timidly. "Well, you know, I didn't really mean any harm, but . . . well, for example, in Lisa's case, I didn't think

there was any future. I mean, no future at all. The evening we spent together didn't really go *that* well. In fact, it didn't go well at *all*, we just didn't get along, there was just no . . . *spark*, you know? And I thought she felt the same way. Besides, it was just a *date*, y'know what I mean?"

"Well, I'm not sure I *do* know what you mean, Mr. Fisher," Ophilia said.

Lolly gave a hoot of laughter and cried, "Yeah, you tell the son-of-a-bitch, Ophilia!" Then she continued laughing, her round shoulders quaking, her large breasts jiggling above her belly.

"Lolly, for crying out loud," Della said, "the man is telling us it was a bad evening, that they didn't get along. How do you know he's not telling the *truth*?"

"Oh, c'mon," Lolly said, swiping a hand in Della's direction, "if he were telling the truth, then why would this woman bother coming on the show to say otherwise? He's just trying to *cover* himself is all!"

Another roll of the eyes from Della as everyone turned to the television again.

"I mean that it wasn't a very good date, that's *all*!" Thomas said. "*Everybody's* had one of those at one time or other."

"But you make a habit of not calling back after the first date, Thomas, isn't that right?" Ophilia asked.

"No, no, *no!* That's *not* right! It just so happens that I've had more bad dates than good ones, that's all! I'm sure any woman you talked to would say the same of her experiences. I mean, if it's a good date, if we get along and have things in common, I call back, of *course* I call back! But if it's apparent to both of us — as it was with Miss Curran — that we didn't enjoy one another's company, then why *bother* calling back? I mean, what's the *point*?"

Ophilia turned to Lisa Curran and said, "What do you have to say to that, Lisa?"

The young woman raised her brows and recrossed her legs with a sigh. "I think that what was apparent to Thomas was not apparent to me." She leaned forward slightly to toss him a cold glance past Dr. Carmody. She continued looking at him as she spoke quietly, her voice level, her mouth hardly opening. "At the time — on that evening, I mean — he was a perfect gentleman. So kind. So different from all the others I'd dated. He opened doors for me, took my coat off for me . . . he even pulled out my chair at the table in the restaurant. We had — "

"But I *always* do that!" Thomas interrupted. "I mean, that's how I was *raised*, you know?"

Ophilia raised her pudgy left hand, which held a thin stack of rectangular blue cards, and said. "Please let her speak!"

Lisa continued: "We had a wonderful conversation over dinner. He was so polite and . . . complimentary. How could I know that — "

"Well, now, that's just not true!" Thomas blurted, slapping a knee with his hand. "You weren't interested in my work, I wasn't interested in — we didn't even like the same *music* or *movies*, for crying out loud!"

"And what exactly *is* your work, Thomas?" Ophilia asked.

"I'm a novelist. I write thrillers."

"What *kind* of thrillers?"

"Well . . . erotic . . . sort of Hitchcockian thrillers that — "

"And what, exactly, didn't Lisa like about them?"

He glanced at her. "She thought they were . . . sexist. Misogynistic."

"And *are* they?"

"Well, I don't think so! If I were a misogynist, why would I behave the way I did on our date? Why would I be so polite? Such a gentleman?"

"But isn't it true that you've often been *accused* of misogyny in your writing, both by critics *and* by experts in the psychiatric field?"

His eyes widened as he stared at Ophilia and he spread his arms in exasperation. "Well, yes, but . . . they're *critics!* They're *supposed* to — "

"Experts in the psychiatric field are not critics, Thomas," Ophilia interrupted.

"Then why are they reviewing my *work*?"

As if he'd said nothing, Ophilia turned to Dr. Carmody and said, "Doctor, you wrote in your book that — " She referred to her cards. " — 'relationships can often be tripped up by the unrealistic expectations created by mainstream films and literature such as the so-called erotic novels of Thomas Fisher', did you not?"

"Yes, that's right, I did," Dr. Carmody said, nodding in a smooth way that seemed impossible with no neck.

"And why did you write that, Doctor?"

"Because Mr. Fisher's novels rely on sex to sell them, and the sex is — "

He turned toward her with a jerk. "That's not *true!*"

She glared at him. "If you don't mind, I am *speaking*, Mr. Fisher." She turned to Ophilia again. "The sex is usually at the expense of the dignity of a female character. And his female characters usually end up as the victims of killers who somehow incorporate sex in their method of killing."

Thomas turned his whole body in the chair so that he could face her. "Do you know how many *men* have been victims in my books? Do you even know what you're *talking* about? I mean, how many of my books have you *read*, anyway?"

"Enough to know what I'm talking about, I assure you."

"No, I mean *which* ones? Have you read — "

Ophilia stepped toward the stage. "Thomas, you're interrupting the doctor, and she's — "

Thomas held up a hand and waved it at Ophilia, leaning forward as he said, "No-no-no, I want to know what books you've read, Dr. Carmody. Please, tell me."

"I've read *The Neighbor* and *Deadly Seductions* and, uh . . . I've read, uh . . ." She bowed her head, cleared her throat and said, "How many do you *think* I should read, Mr. Fisher?"

"More than two, I can tell you that! Those were my first two books! I've written *fourteen* novels! And *half* of those have been bestsellers! So I'm writing something that Americans *want* to read, which means it's striking a *chord* with them, okay? If you've only read *two*, then you don't know what you're — "

"Thomas!" Ophilia snapped. "You have interrupted Dr. Carmody, and I won't have it." Once Thomas was silent, his lips sucked angrily between his teeth, Ophilia turned to Dr. Carmody. "Doctor, you were saying?"

"Yes, I was saying that Mr. Fisher's books depict unrealistic relationships between men and women, in which sex is the *core* of the relationship. But the sex is usually violent, unnatural and sadomasochistic. There is no love, no affection, only sweaty rutting and a lot of heartless, soulless, physical release so graphically depicted that — "

Thomas clutched the ends of the chair's armrests with white-knuckled hands and nearly stood as he shouted, "That is just not true! I've had villains with perverse tastes, of course, because villains are supposed to be despicable, but my protagonists have always been — "

"You're doing it again, Thomas," Ophilia said, holding up her hand and her cards. "Would you *please* let her speak."

He pressed his lips together hard and leaned back in his chair, rubbing his eyes with the fingers of both hands.

The audience applauded Ophilia's handling of Thomas.

Turning to Dr. Carmody, Ophilia said, "You'll get to finish in just a moment, but first — " She turned to the camera. " — we have to break. Be right back."

As the music began and the show faded to a commercial, Della shook her head and said, "Why doesn't she let him talk? It sounds to me like he's got something to say, like he's telling the truth!"

"Have you read any of his books?" Lolly asked her.

"Yeah, the one before last, but that's all."

"Did you like it?" Brenda asked.

"Sure, I thought it was fine. It was suspenseful and scary and — "

"But do you agree with the doctor?" Marilu asked.

"Oh, come on, for crying out loud!" Della snapped, frowning as she tossed a half-eaten cruller back down on the paper towel. She turned to Lolly. "Have *you* read any of his books?"

"Oh, sure. I've read all of them."

Della's eyes opened wide and her mouth dropped open. "*All* of them?" She turned to the other two. "How about you guys? Have you read any of his books?"

Brenda and Marilu both nodded hesitantly.

"And have you, by any chance, read *all* of them?"

The two of them glanced at one another before turning back to Della and nodding slowly.

Della's eyes opened wider as she asked, "Well, did you *like* them? Did you *enjoy* his books?"

They both nodded again and Marilu said, "Yeah, he's a good writer, but I think maybe that doctor's right, y'know? Maybe he's just — "

"I can't believe this!" Della hissed. "You guys are such *hypocrites!* You've read his books and liked them, but . . . do you think he *deserves* what he's gonna *get* on here?"

"Well, you have to admit," Holly said, shrugging, "the sex in his books is pretty unrealistic, right?"

"Then why do you *read* it?" Della asked.

"Cause it's entertaining!" Marilu piped in.

"It's just not realistic," Brenda added.

Then Lolly asked, with a smirk, "Tell me, Della, when was the last time *you* had sex like that, huh? Does your Bobby do that kind of stuff to *you*? Do you two wail like that at night while you're together in bed?"

"No. Of course not! The sex in those books is *fantasy*. It's *meant* to be fantasy! So you guys think this guy is awful because he's given you this sexual fantasy? A fantasy you don't have in real life? Is *that* why you want him to be punished in the way he's going to be punished on this damned show?"

All of them stared at her silently, with widened eyes, as Ophelia returned to remind her viewers of the 900 number they could call to register their opinions.

"Well, that sounds pretty hypocritical, don't you think?" Della asked them, her voice a little more calm now. "He's a novelist. He's supposed to entertain. Fantasy is what he does. So what's wrong with that? I mean, whatever happened to the idea of — "

The other three women suddenly returned their attention to the television as the show continued. Della released a long, quiet sigh, cradled her chin in her palm and put her elbow on the edge of the table, watching with them.

Dr. Carmody was allowed to finish what she was saying before the break. "Mr. Fisher's writing is filled with unwholesome and unrealistic sex that only leads the reader to harbor unrealistic expectations from a relationship. His female characters are depicted as little more than seductresses in skimpy lingerie while the men, more often than not, remain fully clothed. In his books, women are no more than objects, which is an attitude that has been fostered for much too long and *must* come to an end. It must stop. And I think a good place to start is the source of that attitude that reaches millions and millions of people every year in several different languages. Namely, Mr. Fisher's novels. They *must* be stopped."

Della rolled her eyes. "I can't believe it. Now she's talking censorship. On top of what's going to happen to the man, this woman is talking — "

Suddenly, all the others turned to her and hissed, "Sssh!"

"Could you give us your reaction to that, Mr. Fisher?" Ophelia asked.

"Yes. Yes, my reaction is this. If Dr. Carmody succeeds in suppressing my books, and in suppressing my readers' right to read them, then what will she suppress next? Someone's right to worship as they please? Someone's right to do whatever they want in their bedroom with his or her spouse? Is that what she's after?"

There was more negative grumbling from the audience in the studio and Ophelia turned to Lisa Curran.

"Lisa, could you give us your reaction to what Mr. Fisher has said?"

"It's crap," the woman said, tossing her blond hair back over her shoulder.

There was a burst of applause and cheering from the audience.

Lisa continued: "He's a great one for setting himself up as the victim. He does it all the time."

"*You don't even know me!*" Thomas shouted, leaning forward in his chair to look at Lisa. "We went on *one* date and you think you can talk about me like you *know* me?"

Suddenly, Thomas Fisher's microphone was muted and a camera focused on Ophelia's face.

"We have to take a break," she said into the camera. "But my producer says that, so far, we have a huge majority of 'thumbs down' for Mr. Fisher. We'll be back in two minutes."

"They *always* have a majority of thumbs down!" Della barked as she stood during the first commercial. "They do, really, I mean, why is that? It's *always* a majority of thumbs down, right?"

She looked at the others.

They stared up at her. Lolly giggled. Marilu covered her mouth with a palm. Brenda simply turned away from her, directing her eyes to the commercial for a pill that was supposed to shed pounds instantly.

Della sighed, then grabbed a cruller and took her mug to the coffee pot to refill it. But she took her time. She moved slowly. Long after the show came back on, she was still standing by the coffee maker, nibbling on her cruller and stirring the cream and Equal into her coffee. She was not anxious to return to the television and watch more of that sick, corrupt show. In fact, by the time she returned to the table, the next commercial break was half over. She glanced at her watch. There were only thirteen minutes left. She knew what was coming, but she took her seat at the table anyway. She'd just finished her cruller, but

she snatched another from the box and bit into it hard, taking a gulp of the hot coffee.

"The verdict is in from our viewers, who have called our 900 number," Ophilia said. "Now, we want to get our studio audience's opinion. So!" she shouted, facing the audience and raising a hand into the air like a televangelist ready to heal someone. "By your applause, please give us your opinion of Mr. Thomas Fisher! Thumbs up!"

There was a smattering of applause, maybe twelve or fifteen people. Then:

"Thumbs down!"

The audience went berserk. There was applause and cheering and foot-stamping; they sounded like a group of party-crazed college students, perhaps worse.

"Well," Ophilia said as she turned to the camera, smiling, "our studio audience apparently agrees with our viewers — "

"Don't they always?" Della muttered as she finished her cruller; the others ignored her.

" — because our viewers voted an *overwhelming* thumbs down for Mr. Fisher."

There was a quick cut to Mr. Fisher sitting alone on the stage. The other women were gone now. Mr. Fisher looked even more terrified than before.

"So," Ophilia said, "I have nothing more to say than — "

Della's lips moved with Ophilia's words.

" — have at it!"

The seats emptied as the entire audience moved forward like a flood, like a force of nature.

Della turned away and grabbed another cruller, biting into it hard, chewing hard, and biting into it hard once again, her cheeks bulging as she turned reluctantly toward the others.

Lolly, Marilu and Brenda began to cheer and clap, bouncing up and down in their chairs as Della stuffed that cruller into her mouth and her eyes moved slowly toward the television.

There was a lot of blood. The women had closed in on Mr. Fisher like sharks. Their arms rose and fell, their fingers curled into bloody claws. Some of the women were even using their teeth.

Della stopped mid-bite, the cruller still in her mouth as she gaped at the television.

As the others continued to clap and cheer and laugh and bounce in their chairs, Della pressed her teeth through the cruller and tossed it, unfinished, onto the table as she began to chew furiously. She leaned forward and watched. Something moved suddenly through her body — anger, hatred . . . most of all, the bilious hatred — and her hands clutched into fists and pressed against her thighs.

The others were cheering, but she was silent.

But only for a while.

Suddenly, Della began to cheer along with them, her voice muffled slightly by the mouthful of cruller, and she began to pound her fists on her thighs hard . . . she pounded and pounded, as she cried, "Get him! Get the son-of-a-bitch! Tear him apart!"

The others were doing the same, their eyes attached to the television screen.

And on that screen, Della's very words were taking place.

At first, the women threw nothing more than shreds of clothes into the air, over their shoulders, onto the floor. But then, moments later, they were throwing patches of skin.

The skin flew through the air trailing splatterings of blood.

Then, the skin had hair attached to it.

Mr. Fisher's screams were muffled because there was no microphone close by to catch them.

Within a few minutes, the women were throwing other things over their shoulders. Wet, black-red things that hit the floor sloppily. But the microphones were kept away, so there were no real sounds to go with the sights.

At one point, the blood splattered the camera lens, and they cut instantly to another angle.

Della continued to shout with the others. She clapped her hands, stomped her feet, and their voices, their stomping, their clapping, all of it blended together in an almost crowd-like sound in that small space.

Then, quite suddenly, Ophelia's face filled the screen, smiling, showing her teeth, crinkling her eyes, the foam bulb of the microphone just beneath her mouth.

"Tomorrow," Ophelia said, "we will be talking with the adult daughters of fathers who have abused them. Please join us." She nod-

ded, then stepped aside, and the camera closed in on the chaos that was taking place on the stage.

Chunks of skin, organs, and strings of intestines flew through the air.

Blood spread over the carpet and splattered through the air.

Thomas Fisher's arms shot up and down, up and down, convulsively.

Ophilia's theme music began and the credits began to roll.

Della sat back in her chair, picked up her unfinished cruller and bit into it twice as the others continued to cheer on the women who were pulling Mr. Fisher apart with their bare hands.

When the show finally ended and was replaced by a commercial for some exercising device that was guaranteed to take off inches and pounds within four weeks, the others turned to Della. They saw her sitting in her chair, chewing on her cruller and staring at the television with a relaxed expression.

"I don't understand you," Lolly said.

"Neither do I." Brenda added.

Della finished the cruller and washed it down with a couple swallows of coffee. "Why not?"

Marilu said, "Because you don't like *Ophilia!*"

"I think it's just because you don't understand her," Lolly said.

Della realized they had not seen her reaction to the show. She smiled confidently. "No, I *don't* like her. And yes, I *do* understand her. The thing is . . . I just think what she does is sick and morally reprehensible."

The others laughed.

"Laugh all you want," Della said. "I think it's sick and disgusting."

They ignored the disagreement and turned on the news to see if they could catch a glimpse of the latest footage of the most recent riot in Los Angeles . . .

Seven

The Devil's Music

THIS STORY IS DEDICATED TO NEWT GINGRICH AND BOB DOLE, TWO MEN WHO FEEL COMPELLED TO TELL US REPEATEDLY THAT EVERYTHING WE DO IN OUR LIVES — I MEAN US, YOU AND ME, EVERYTHING WE LISTEN TO, WATCH, READ, AND EVEN THINK — IS FUNDAMENTALLY WRONG AND CAN ONLY BE CORRECTED WITH THEIR HELP. HEY, NEWT? BOB? DO WHAT YOU'RE PAID FOR, SHUT THE HELL UP, AND MIND YOUR OWN DAMNED BUSINESS, OKAY?

Craven's death-like sleep was ripped open by a sudden explosion of bright light in the room. He twisted and turned, tangling himself in the sheet and blankets. He tried to open his eyes, but they felt as if they'd been stapled shut. His mouth made a crusty slurping sound when he opened it to move his fuzzy tongue back and forth over his lips, which felt rather numb.

There was movement in the room . . . footsteps hushed by carpet . . . the whisper of clothing rubbing together.

Someone had turned on the lights or opened the drapes. Who?

Craven fought to sit up, fought to think. Where was he? Who was with him? It had to be someone who didn't know him very well — some girl he'd picked up, probably — because anyone who knew him well would know better than to do this.

Groaning, Craven hunched forward and scrubbed his face with his hands.

They were on tour . . . yeah, that's right, Mephisto was finishing up a tour. Or had they already finished it? Was last night the last show?

Or the *next to* last show . . . which would mean they were in Seattle. Or was their next to last stop in San Francisco?

He pushed hard on each temple with the heel of a hand, as if to squeeze the thick foam out of his skull, and croaked, "Wanna turn the fuckin' lights off, for cryin' out loud?"

"It is time to get up, Mr. Craven. I am afraid you have an appointment."

Craven's naked, scrawny body jerked at the sound of the strange voice and his eyes fluttered open between bushy brows and dark puffy half-circles. He squinted against the bright sunlight shining in through the long rectangular window across from the bed and tried to make out the figure that stood in the glare.

It was tall, thin and appeared to be dressed all in white.

Craven grunted as he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and sat up, rubbing his eyes. Seeing the room brought a few things back . . . like the statuesque black girl who'd shared the round bed with him the night before. What was her name? Angie, or . . . Angica . . . *Angelica*, that was it.

"Angelica?" he called, running a hand back through his long, bushy black hair. "Hey, Angelica, where —"

"She left some time ago," the voice said. It was a male voice, gentle, refined and ever so slightly annoyed.

He was able to see better now and could see the silver-haired man in the dapper, three-piece white suit with a red tie, standing rigidly straight and looking down his sharp, narrow nose at Craven.

"Who the fuck're *you*?" Craven growled, more alert now. He stood, grabbed his robe and slipped it on, tying the belt in front with a couple of firm jerks. "What're you doin' in my room? Who let you in?"

One narrow brow rose over a small, deep-set eye and the man asked, "Are those questions in order of importance?"

"Okay, I'm callin' the desk." Craven turned to the nightstand and reached for the phone. But it wasn't there. He looked across the bed at the nightstand on the other side. No phone there, either. He looked around the room, but could not find a telephone.

The man said, "You threw it out of the bathroom window last night because it kept ringing while you were trying to have sex."

Craven thought about that a moment, his back to the stranger. The man was right. He spun around and asked, "How the hell did *you* know?"

"I believe the telephone bounced off the top of a passing bus, then shattered on the sidewalk. An old homeless woman picked it up and put it in her shopping basket with the rest of her, um . . . possessions." The man joined his hands together in front of him.

Craven took in a deep breath and let it out slowly as he rubbed the side of his throbbing head. "Okay, look . . . I had a rough night, so just get the fuck outta here and I won't tell anybody."

"Every night is a rough night for you, Mr. Craven," the man said with a smirk. "But last night was rougher than usual."

"It's Craven. Not *Mr.* Craven, just *Craven*. You live in a fuckin' cave or somethin'? Don't you know who I am?"

"Yes. You are Sidney Edward Quelch. But if you prefer simply Craven, I am happy to oblige."

Craven froze and gawked.

No one knew his real name. Not even the press had dug that up. To everyone, he was just Craven, and that's how he wanted to remain. If any of the band's screaming teenage fans got word of the fact that the lead singer and guitarist of Mephisto — one of the hottest heavy metal bands in the country for the last several years — was really Sidney Edward Quelch . . . the thought made him feel queasy. He stepped over to the man, looked angrily into his eyes and asked, "What did you say?"

The man smiled. "You heard me." His face was smooth and young-looking in spite of the silver hair combed straight back and the small eyes that seemed deep with age.

Craven's voice dropped to a near-whisper. "How did you know that? My name, I mean?"

"Oh, I know everything about you. In fact, at this moment, I know more about you than *you* seem to."

Craven stared angrily at the smiling face, then spun around and headed for the door. "Okay, if I can't *call* the desk, I'll go down there and get somebody to kick your ass out!" Before he got to the door, the man spoke again:

"You can't get *anyone*, Sidney. You are dead."

Craven stopped, turned to the man and asked, "What the hell're you talkin' about?" Then he added loudly, "And don't call me *Sydney*, dammit!"

"Excuse me, Craven," the man said with an apologetic nod, "but you've always been listed as Sidney in my files. I hope you understand."

"Files? What files? *Who the fuck are you?*"

"Well, now, that depends on your childhood training." The man crossed one arm over his chest, rested the other elbow on it and stroked his chin with a thumb and forefinger. "Let's see, your late father was the minister of a small town Protestant church . . . your mother was the organist . . . so, I suppose *you* would know me as Satan."

Craven stared at him for a long moment.

The man continued. "Some call me Beelzebub, some Mephistopheles . . . or Lucifer, Belial, Leviathan, or just plain old Devil. In fact — " He frowned and scratched his cheek thoughtfully with the tip of one, slender, long-nailed finger. " — last month, one fellow called me the Head of Production of Disney Studios." He thought about that a moment, then smiled wryly. "Oh, well. Insults don't count. In any case, you would most likely be familiar with me by the name of Satan."

A smile grew slowly on Craven's long, pale face. "Oh, boy. Holy shit. What city're we in, anyway? Is there a mental hospital nearby, or somethin'?" He rubbed a hand down over his face as he backed away, chuckling. "Son of a bitch, where the hell did Angelica go, anyways?" He headed for the bathroom, fists clenched at his sides with aggravation.

"Angelica left as soon as she realized you had overdosed on pills and alcohol. That was around four-thirty this morning."

Craven spun around and glared at the man. "Look, if you get off on this shit, *fine*. But go do it to somebody *else*, okay?"

"I don't necessarily get off on it. It is simply my job." He joined his hands behind his back. "True, I enjoyed it very much at first. Loved it. But even the most exciting job becomes insipid once predictability sets in. And my job is fraught with predictability. Especially when it comes to *you* folks. Rock stars. All the same. Every last one of you. In fact, during these past two decades or so, you've all become virtual

automatons. Not only are you no longer any fun, you are positively *tedious*. A *burden!* No challenge, no work involved at all. Give me a meek, sweaty scoutmaster to work on any day of the week. Or, say, some horny, slightly dysfunctional soul caring for a group of mentally challenged young people. Now *that's* fun. But *you* people! You have no moral struggle, no spiritual conflict. It's almost as if — " He waved a hand in the air vaguely, searching for the right word. " — as if you were bred to do what you do. And, frankly, I think what you do is atrocious. On top of that, I take it as a personal affront to myself and my work."

Craven's anger faded from his face and was replaced by a look of confusion as he stared at the natty stranger rambling on several feet away from him. His headache was getting worse and his muscles ached from his shoulders down to his calves; for the moment, his first priority was to get a stiff drink or a few pills . . . but lurking in the back of his mind was the growing fear that this man could possibly be one of those dangerous lunatics who stalk celebrities. He decided to forget about relief from his aches for the moment and make his way back to the bed, where he had a .45 in the nightstand drawer.

Speaking quietly, wearily, Craven asked, "What the fuck're you talkin' about?"

The man rolled his eyes as he lifted his arms in a loose, flapping gesture, then let them slap back to his sides. "You see? You are all the same! It's not enough for you to suck the very life out of my work! No, no. When it comes time for you to go, you waste my time by staring at me with those heavy-lidded, drug-dulled eyes, asking *stupid* questions like *that!* And that is why I loathe each and every one of you. *And* — " He lowered his head and gave a look of hateful disgust." — I loathe your dreadful, guitar smashing, interchangeable music . . . although I use the word music *very* loosely."

Craven took a couple slow steps forward, smiling. "Hey, dude, c'mon. You don't like rock and roll? What's your problem, huh?"

The man shook his head slowly, eyes closed. "It took you until now to figure that out? That's another thing — you're all stupid. And do not address me as dude. It's Satan. If you call me dude one more time, it'll be *Mister* Satan from then on. Now, if you don't mind, I'm on a tight schedule." He removed a small black book from an inside jacket pocket and paged through it. "Around

lunchtime, I'm due to tell a disturbed teenage boy to rape, kill and eat his mother and little sister." He closed the book and slipped it back into the pocket. "So let's be going, shall we? I would like to have you processed, filed and settled by Judgment Day, if that's all right with you."

With a few more small steps, Craven shrugged and said, "Well, look, man, I'm real sorry, y'know? But I've gotta meet some people today. I've got things to do. I wanna go back home . . . or to the next gig, whichever it is. I'm not really sure. But why, uh . . . why don't you just take off now and see if you can find someone else to go with you, huh, bud?"

The man set his jaw and a dark shadow seemed to fall over his face, especially his small eyes. Sunlight sparkled off his dazzling silver hair as he moved forward suddenly, rapidly, a low growl coming up from deep in his chest. He stopped two inches from Craven, his face pushed a little closer, and snarled through clenched teeth, "Listen to me, little person, I am not *dude*, I am not *man*, I am not *bud*. . . *I am Satan! Do you understand me?*"

He stopped, frozen there as Craven swallowed hard, trying to hide his sudden fear.

"I think you do understand, *Sidney*." He took a step back and locked his hands behind his back again, his calm restored. "Now, you have no people to meet. You have no more gigs. You are *dead*. So, why don't we leave before the room starts to smell, eh?"

Craven stared at the man, heart pounding rapidly, sweat gathering on his forehead. Without turning his head, he moved his eyes to his right and looked over at the nightstand about six feet away. He considered diving for it and getting the gun — he obviously needed it because there was something *very* wrong with this intruder — but if this stranger was armed, he would be able to draw his gun before Craven got the drawer open. Instead, he looked at the man again and asked, "So . . . where you takin' me?"

The man bowed his head a moment and released a long, irritated sigh. "I often say to myself with some hope, They can't *all* be that stupid.' But you rock stars keep proving me wrong again and again. You are going to Hell, *Sidney*."

"Hey, look, man, I don't know how you found out about my name, but stop calling me that, okay?"

“Not unless you stop addressing me with those ridiculous terms of endearment that males like you use with other males. So, Sidney, do we have a deal? Are you going to call me Satan? After all, we’re going to be together for a very, very long time. We might as well learn to get along.”

Craven felt sweat dribbling down his spine beneath his robe. His vision began to blur with each throb of his headache. Where were the others in the band? Why hadn’t Marcus burst in on him to wake him for breakfast like he usually did? It always annoyed the hell out of Craven . . . but he would have welcomed it now.

“I asked you a question,” the man said sternly, his face getting dark again. “Are you going to call me Satan . . . or *not*?”

Craven thought about that a moment. True, his fear was growing . . . but so was his anger. He’d had trouble with loonies before, and he’d found that they almost always backed down if he stood up to them. There was something different about this guy — something a little more threatening than the usual nutcase — but Craven was willing to bet he’d back off if dealt with properly.

“No, I’m *not* gonna call you Satan. Because it’s *stupid*.”

The man’s eyes widened and his brows lifted slowly. His lips parted and he seemed about to speak, so Craven continued.

“Now, look,” he said calmly, but with a touch of firmness in his voice, “I don’t know who you are or how the hell you got in here, but I want you out, okay? And I’m willing to give you whatever you want, too, okay? You want some money, I’ll give you some money. I’ve got a whole cabinet of liquor, just about any drug you could want . . . I just want you to knock this shit off and get outta here.”

The man stared at him with deadly, cold eyes as his lips pressed together harder and harder, turning a creamy color.

“So, what’ll it be? What do you want? ‘cause I just want you to get the fuck out so I can get on with my day, see?”

The man began to pace — a few steps this way, a few steps that way — never taking his eyes off Craven, whose head turned back and forth, watching him.

“You miserable little shit,” the man growled quietly. “All these years of insulting me — I mean *directly* and *personally* insulting *me* — with that *crrrrap* you call music, that *crrrrap* that makes you countless millions and gets you enough women and booze and drugs — and, of

course, the occasional young boy — for a *dozen* men! And now, you can't even show me a sliver of respect. Oh, I am *sick* of your kind. When you die, it always takes such a tremendous effort to get you to go where you're *going*! Do you know that Janis Joplin tried to kick me in the balls? And that pretentious drunkard Jim Morrison actually had the nerve to — "

"Look, Mister, I'm not insulting you with my music. I don't even *know* you. If you don't like it, just don't listen to it, okay?"

"If you don't *know* me, then why do you — like so many others in your business — target *me*? Why all the pentagrams and upside down crosses on your album covers? Why all the songs with lyrics about *me*, about giving your soul to *me* and worshipping *me*?"

"Oh, we're back to the Satan stuff again, huh?" Craven asked with a little roll of the eyes. "Okay, if you insist you're Satan, I'll go along with it. Look, that stuff sells, you know? The parents hate it, so the kids love it. It's rebellious, see, and *kids* are rebellious. It's just marketing, that's all. Trust me, we don't actually *worship* Satan or make *sacrifices* to him or anything. I mean . . . to *you*," he added with a quiet chuckle.

"Dammit, I *know* that! Don't you think I'd *know* if you worshipped me? And if you *would* perform the occasional sacrifice, you would be a hell of a lot more interesting to deal with!" He rushed over to Craven and got in his face again. "I wouldn't mind so much if you would just get it right . . . but *you don't*. And on top of all that. I *hate* rock and roll . . . but because of you, everyone here thinks it's *my* music. Music that I inspire, that I approve of and that I use to collect souls. If I used morons like *you* to collect souls, Hell would be *empty*. What does that garbage of yours have to do with *me*? Why don't one of you, just *once*, try something different and put together a group called . . . oh, I don't know, how about Jesus and the Apostles? Why doesn't someone go out on stage one time dressed up like the *pope*? But no, you're all the same. You all pick on me and I get blamed for that indecipherable trash that makes you so famous . . . and me so *hated*. But," he sighed, "I am just wasting time with all this chatter, Sidney. So . . ." He pulled his lips back over his teeth. Each tooth had been filed to razor-sharp points.

Boy, Craven thought, for somebody who doesn't like rock and roll, this guy puts Alice to shame.

". . . shall we be on our way?"

The man bent his head forward, evil teeth bared and glistening with saliva, and a narrow strip of wet black tissue slid out of his mouth, forked at the end, and moved slowly back and forth over the teeth.

Craven jerked back and blurted, "Holy *shit!*"

The man chuckled. "People like you always have to have a little proof." Then, his grey, deep-set eyes began to glow a shimmering red.

Without even thinking about it, Craven threw himself at the man holding out an elbow. He butted him backward and the stranger flopped to the floor.

Craven dove frantically for the small wooden nightstand, arms outstretched for the drawer.

He watched as his hands passed through the wood as if it were water. He felt nothing. His hands seemed numb. With gaping eyes, he lost his balance and fell forward with a clumsy stumble. He tried to press his hand against the wall, but it only passed through, as if it were less than a shadow. He stood up straight, turned around and looked down.

He was standing in the middle of the nightstand, his legs invisible beneath it . . . almost as if he were *wearing* it. And still he felt nothing.

Craven lifted his head and saw the man on his feet, arms folded across his chest, grinning around his sharp teeth. Craven said tremulously, "Stay the fuck away from me, y'hear me? *Huh?*"

The man laughed. "You always need some kind of proof before you start paying attention. Yes, you are all the same. You use me, but you haven't a single good word for me when I come to get you. A bunch of little spoiled, ill-mannered snots, all of you. Normally, I *admire* that in a person, but in people like you, Sidney . . . well, it's just incredibly annoying. But, that's neither here nor there, I suppose. Right now, it is time for us to go, Sidney. So — " He held his right hand out and began to move slowly toward Craven. " — why don't you take my hand?"

As impossible as it seemed, Craven's eyes opened even wider and his mouth began flapping open and closed, open and closed, with nothing coming out, until: "No, no, *no!* I'm *not* gonna take your fuckin' hand!" His head was shaking back and forth in big, spastic jerks. "Why don't you, umm, just . . . j-juh just forget about all this and go without me, huh?"

"You can't stay here."

"Why not? Sure I can, I'll just stay and we'll both pretend this never happened, huh? I mean, I've got my work a-and . . . and you've got your work, right? Know what I'm saying?"

"As I said, Sidney, you can't stay here." His eyes moved to the bed and he nodded slightly.

Craven's brow furrowed above his wide eyes and he turned, very slowly, toward the bed.

First, he saw the shape under the blankets . . . the feet sticking upward . . . the splayed arms on each side of the torso . . . and then the worst, the very, very worst . . .

. . . he saw his own head on the pillow, his bushy hair spread over the pillowcase, his eyes closed, his mouth open . . . and there was no movement . . . no stirring, no breathing . . . nothing. Nothing at all.

Craven made a small, pathetic sound in his throat and turned back to the man who was coming nearer. He held up a hand and said, "No, no. *Stop!* Please don't come any closer, please, I'm, uh . . . I just . . ." He felt dizzy and sick all of a sudden and found it difficult to speak. So he just stopped and stared, arm still outstretched, his palm open at the end.

"You know, Sidney . . . if you don't want to come, I have some rather persuasive methods of *taking* you. I have been doing this for a very long time . . . and I have honed my abilities to a *very* sharp edge."

Craven was surprised by the tears that suddenly began to spill from his eyes. He stopped them immediately and took a deep breath, let it out slowly and even mustered a smile.

"Well, y'know." Craven said, "I like to think I have an open mind. So maybe, um . . . maybe this isn't so bad after all. A new experience, y'know."

"That's a good boy," the man said as he stopped in front of Craven.

"I mean, y'know, maybe I can put a band together when I get there. Hey, you got Joplin and Morrison and who knows who *else*, right? We can really *jam*, huh? Yeah, this might not be so bad after all."

The man's smile disappeared in a heartbeat. "Oh, no. No-no-no-no. No, there are no rock bands where you are going. I thought I told you. I despise rock and roll. Now, take my hand."

Craven jerked his hand away, frowning. "Okay, then, um, what kinda music *do* you like?"

"Good music. The best."

“Like who? Like what?”

He smiled again, showing his two rows of fangs. “We have a wonderful sound system. My favorite music is piped everywhere, loudly . . . and it is *always* playing.”

Craven’s frown deepened. “But what is it?”

“Lawrence Welk and Wayne Newton,” the man said, his smile growing, his fangs sparkling. He grabbed Craven’s hand suddenly and tightly. *Very* tightly.

Craven began to scream as he saw the room dissolve around him.

In seconds, they were gone . . .

Eight

Bait

**THIS IS FOR EVERY PARENT WHO EVER THOUGHT
THEY WEREN'T NEGLECTING THEIR CHILDREN . . .
AND REALIZED TOO LATE THAT THEY WERE.**

"Go over to the dairy stuff and get a gallon of milk," Mom told them as she stood in the produce section of the Seaside Supermarket, squeezing one avocado after another, looking for ripe ones. "Low-fat, remember."

They knew, both of them: nine-year-old Cole and his seven-year-old sister, Janelle. Their mother always ate and drank low-fat or non-fat *everything*. And besides, they knew the brand of milk on sight. The two children headed down the aisle between two long produce display cases.

"And hurry up!" Mom called behind them. "I wanna get out of here so I can have a smoke. Meet me up in the front."

"She's always in a hurry," Janelle said, matter-of-factly.

"Yeah. Usually to have to smoke."

They found the dairy section and went to the refrigerated cases, scanning the shelves of milk cartons, different sizes, different brands. When he spotted the right one, Cole pulled the glass door open, stood on tip-toes, reached up and tilted the carton off the fourth shelf up, nearly dropping it. He let the door swing closed behind him as they started to head for the front of the store to find their mother. But Cole stopped.

"Here's another one," he said quietly.

Janelle stopped, turned back. "Another what?"

"Another one of those kids. On the milk cartons. See?"

He turned the carton so she could see the splotchy, black-and-white depiction of a little boy's smiling face. It was such a bad picture — as if someone had run the boy's face through a disfunctioning copy machine — that he looked more nightmarish than pitiful. But pity was exactly what the black writing on the carton seemed to be aiming for; Cole read it aloud to Janelle:

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS BOY?

9-YEAR-OLD PETER MULRAKES

Last seen in Eureka, CA in parking lot of Safeway supermarket. Missing — 1 year, 7 months.

There were a few more details that Cole skipped over, along with a phone number to call if anyone should see the boy or have information regarding his whereabouts. At the very bottom, he read silently, to himself:

A NON-PROFIT COMMUNITY SERVICE
OF VALENCIA DAIRIES, INC.

"Where's Eureka?" Janelle asked.

"Couple hours down the coast from here, I think," Cole replied, staring at the haunting face with its smeared features and splotchy eyes. "I wonder where they go," he muttered to himself, thinking aloud. "I wonder what happens to them when they disappear . . . who takes them away . . . and why."

He turned and went back to the dairy case, opened the door and began turning the other milk cartons around.

"Mom said to hurry," Janelle said. "She wants to smoke."

"In a second."

Each carton had a face on it, some different than others: little boys, little girls, some black, some white and some Asian . . . but all with the same splotchy features and blurred lines that would make the children almost impossible to identify, even if they were standing right there in front of Cole.

"They have 'em on the grocery bags, too, y'know," Janelle said, in her usual matter-of-fact way.

"Yeah . . . I know."

"What the hell are you two doing?"

Cole spun around, letting the door close again. Their mother stood with her cart, frowning at them.

"C'mon, now, I forgot the fish," she said, waving at them. "Hurry up. I wanna get out of here."

So you can have a smoke, Cole thought.

They went to the seafood counter where, beyond the glass of the display case, Cole and Janelle looked at all the shrimp and scallops, squid and octopus, all kinds of fish, clams, oysters, crabs, lobsters, eel . . .

Like a dead National Geographic special, Cole thought.

Some of the fish were still whole, and their dead, staring eyes looked like glass.

"How did they kill 'em, Cole?" Janelle asked.

He blinked; at first he thought she was still talking about the faces on the milk cartons, because they were still on his mind. "The fish? They caught 'em on hooks."

"How?"

"With bait."

"What kinda bait?"

He hated it when she did this. "Sometimes other fish. Y'know, smaller fish than them. And sometimes other things . . . whatever the fish like to eat."

The man behind the counter offered to help Mom, and she said, "I'd like a couple of swordfish steaks, please."

"Sorry, but we're out. Till tomorrow."

A sigh puffed from her lips. "You mean, we live right here on the coast and you're out of *swordfish*?"

"'Fraid so, ma'am."

"Okay, then . . . how about shark?"

"Oh, yeah, got some fresh shark steaks here. How many?"

"Two. And, uh — " She looked down at Cole and Janelle.

"What do you guys want for dinner?"

"Not fish," Cole said. "I hate fish."

Janelle added, "So does Daddy. He said so."

"Well, that's just too bad for him. He could stand to lose weight and red meat is really fattening. Besides, it causes cancer. Fish is good for you, so what kind do you want?"

When they wouldn't respond, she ordered some whitefish.

Janelle leaned over and whispered to Cole, "Poor fish. I don't wanna eat 'em if they've been tricked into bein' killed."

Cole looked over the top of the counter to the enormous swordfish on the wall behind it. It was shiny and regal, with its long, needle-like nose jutting into the air. And, of course, it was very dead.

Once they had the fish, they had to walk fast to keep up with Mom on her way up to the register. They stood in line for a while, then when they got up to the counter, they started looking over the racks of candy bars and gum to their right, asking Mom if they could have some.

"No, absolutely not, you know what that stuff *does* to you?" she hissed, bending toward them. "Just go on outside and wait by the car. I'll be right out."

So, they did. But not before Cole noticed the brown paper bags that were being packed with groceries at each counter.

Smearing faces looked back at him from the sides of the bags as if they were watching him lead his sister out of the store. The faces were haunted . . . and haunting.

On the way to the car, they passed the newspaper vending boxes and Cole stopped when he saw a picture of a little baby on the front page of the local paper with the word **MISSING!** beneath it. The word made him stop. He read the headline, frowning:

2 MONTH OLD BABY STOLEN FROM CRIB
IN MIDDLE OF NIGHT —
POLICE HAVE NO SUSPECTS

Cole stared at the baby for a while, frowning, wondering what had happened to it. Who would want to take a little baby? Why?

With a slight burning in his gut, he turned and hurried after his little sister toward the car.

They stood by the car, kicking a smashed aluminum can back and forth between them over the dirty pavement. The nearby ocean gave the chilly, damp breeze a salty smell and seagulls circled overhead, calling out sharply.

The musical voice of a little girl called to them from a few yards away.

“Hey! Wanna see my puppies?”

She stood beside a grey van. The sliding door on the side was half open.

“What kind of puppies?” Cole asked as he and Janelle took a few steps toward her.

“Little bitty ones.” She held her palms a little ways apart to demonstrate.

“Let’s go see the puppies,” Janelle said, smiling.

“Okay. But keep an eye out for Mom . . .”

Mom pushed her cart of grocery bags through the automatic door and stopped just outside the store. The door closed behind her with a hum as she fished a Marlboro out of her purse and turned against the wind, leaning her head forward to light up.

It was while she was lighting her cigarette that the grey van drove by.

By the time she lifted her head, taking a deep drag on the cigarette, the van was already gone.

So were the children . . .

Cole awoke in complete, solid, almost *tangible* darkness.

It was a silent darkness at first because of the loud ringing in his ears and the throbbing in his head. The ringing eventually subsided — slowly, gradually — and was replaced by the cry of a baby.

No, no, the cry of two . . . no, three, maybe four . . . no, *several* babies.

And somewhere nearby there were voices that barely rose above the crying of the babies.

But there was something else . . . something weird . . . something *wrong* . . .

The ground beneath him and the damp, cold darkness all around him was moving . . . tilting back and forth . . . this way, that way, back and forth.

He reached down to feel the surface beneath him, but suddenly realized that he could not move his arms. His wrists were tied together behind him and his ankles were tied together before him.

Then he noticed something else: a low rumble that made its way through the surface beneath him and up into his body, gathering in his chest like quivering indigestion. It sounded like an engine.

Are we on a bus or something? he thought, then: We? We?

"Janelle?" he said, his voice hoarse and weak. "Janelle, you here? C'mon, Janelle, say something!"

"Who you talkin' to?" another voice asked. It was the voice of a child, a boy, somewhere around Cole's age.

"What? I'm . . . talking to my sister," Cole said quietly, uncertainly.

"Who?" a little girl asked from somewhere in the darkness — not Janelle — her voice trembling. "Who are you talking to?"

"My sister, Janelle. Janelle? You there? C'mon, Janelle, you *gotta* be there!"

The voices paused for a long moment. Cole could hear the babies crying, some of them gurgling and making spitting sounds, and when he listened very closely, he could hear the breathing of other children . . . some of them were even making purring little snoring sounds . . . and some of them rustled now and then in the dark.

He called for Janelle a few more times, raising his voice in spite of how much it hurt his head, in spite of the way his stomach was beginning to feel sick because of the lurching back-and-forth movements.

Finally, there was a little voice . . . so small and weak and frightened: "Cole? You . . . er you there?"

"Yeah, Munchkin, I'm here. I'm right here."

"Where?"

"I'm here, real close. You *hear* me?"

"I can't see you."

"Yeah, I know, but you can hear me, right?"

"Uh-huh?"

"Good, then that's all that counts right now. We'll see each other soon. You just lay still and don't be afraid, 'cause I'm here."

"Okay. Good. Okay."

Her voice was so small, like a thread being pulled through the darkness by a dull needle.

They were all quiet.

A few of the babies had stopped crying.

The voices outside were more audible now, easier to make out.

". . . 'cause these here sharks are damned easy to catch, and 'cause most of the shoppers goin' to their local fish counter in the grocery store are so fuckin' stupid that they . . ."

". . . don't know what you're figurin', that they're goin' in to buy shark steaks and they don't even know that we're . . ."

There was laughter then, loud, lusty and full of phlegm.

“... you moron, ‘cause of what we use ‘em for! And ‘cause we...”

One of the babies wailed for a moment and the voices melted together into a single meaningless sound, and then:

“... they go into grocery stores and restaurants as cheap scallops and swordfish steaks and, a-course, shark steaks, so we pick up the money and they can...”

“... ‘at’s why that stuff is so cheap in some places, ‘cause we’re out here...”

“... people eating more fish these days to stay healthy and lose weight, so we...”

There was another noise behind these voices, a noise that was hard to identify at first although it sounded so familiar, as if it were a sound Cole had heard just yesterday, or the day before.

Then, quite suddenly, he realized it was a sound he heard almost *every* day... the ocean.

He was on the ocean! That was why everything was moving back and forth, back and forth!

They were on a boat.

Suddenly, there was a rattling sound and a door burst open, sending blinding light through the darkness. Cole turned his head away and clenched his eyes, squinting.

Heavy footsteps sounded on wood and there was a sharp *click!* and the room filled with light that was bright enough to ooze through Cole’s eyelids and cut into his head like a hot knife.

There was deep, booming laughter from one man and another barked, “See? Here they are! All we need! Lessee, whatta we want here, now, huh? Lessee...”

Cole tried to open his eyes. It was hard at first, painful because of the sudden bright light... then he tried opening them gradually, just a little bit at a time. First, he saw only bright light... then shapes moving this way and that... then the light began to diminish and the shapes began to take more distinct forms... features... faces...

“Well, we’ll need a few a-them,” one man said, pointing to some shelves with rows of cardboard boxes on them.

The other man, taller, bigger, with broad shoulders and big arms, said, “Yeah, okay, you get them. I’ll get *these*. A couple of ‘em. Lessee, lessee, which ones, which ones...”

By that time, Cole's vision had cleared enough to see the enormous, bearded man looking down at him.

"You awake, boy?" the man growled through a grin.

"Huh? *What?*"

The man kicked him, digging the toe of his boot beneath Cole's right knee. Hard.

"*Owww!*" Cole shouted, squinting, trying hard not to cry.

"Yeah, yeah, you're awake all right. You'll do."

The man reached down and slung an arm around Cole's chest, carrying him over his arm like a sack of potatoes so he was staring downward at the moist wooden floor.

"And *you!*" the man growled, and his voice passed through Cole's entire body. Cole could feel the man picking up another body, another child. Then the man turned and said to his partner, "Go ahead and take four of 'em outta those boxes, just go ahead. We'll need at least that many. 'Fact, we'll prob'ly hafta come back in here and get more."

Cole raised his head and saw all of them, all the children tied up with their backs against the wall or lying on the wood floor. And then he saw Janelle. She looked up and their eyes met.

"*Cole!*" she shouted, her voice lumpy and dry.

"Don't worry, Munchkin, just stay right there, don't you move, and don't worry about a thing. I'll see you in a little while, okay? Okay?"

With her little mouth hanging open, all she could do was nod.

The man carrying Cole laughed, long and hard . . . and Cole wondered if the man was laughing at what he had said to his sister.

The other children disappeared the moment the door was shut.

And then there was sunlight, brilliant and blinding sunlight, and Cole groaned as he clenched both his teeth and eyes.

Cole was dropped, hit the floor hard and the wind was blown from his lungs. He gasped for breath, thrashed around, straining against the ties on his hands and feet, until he was on his back and staring up at the sky: patches of blue surrounded by dark and pregnant clouds.

He saw the other man with things under his arms, things wrapped in white cloths . . . things that were wailing, crying, sobbing.

Babies, that's what they were . . . babies.

"Okay, we got 'em," said the man who had carried him out. "They're all here, so let's get to it, you guys!"

Lying on his back and watching them, Cole tried to count them.

There were three . . . no, four men. Or was that guy over there the fifth? He couldn't tell, and quickly didn't care.

And then one of the men lifted a baby high, dangling from his hand. It was wrapped in white cloth. He unwrapped it until it was naked. He handed it to another man, saying, "Remember, the shoulder, that's where it's gotta go."

"I know, I know, whatta you think I am, some kinda amateur?"

The man held the baby roughly in his left hand.

Cole saw the large, barbed hook in his right hand.

The hook went through the baby's shoulder.

Blood spurted and flowed from the wound.

The baby screamed so hard and so long that its face turned red as its arms and legs began to flail and kick.

The hook was attached to a cable and was thrown over the side of the boat with a lot of laughter from all the men.

Cole's eyes were gaping as he stared at them and he suddenly felt as if he might throw up.

A man at the end of the boat holding an enormous fishing pole, like no fishing pole Cole had ever seen before, shouted laughingly, "Oh-ho, well, I guess we'll see what I get here, huh?" Then he burst into laughter, throwing his head back.

Suddenly, one of the men was bending over him, over Cole, lifting him up.

"I'll hold him," he said, "you cut the ropes."

Another of the men, some distance away, suddenly bellowed, "You know, I never thought about it before, but at least this way we'll make the liberals happy 'cause we ain't killin' dolphins, right?"

All the other men, including the one holding Cole, roared with laughter.

Someone cut the ropes and his limbs were free.

Big hands with fat fingers ripped his shirt off and peeled his pants from his legs like the thin seal from a sausage. They pulled his shoes and socks off and tore his underwear away until he was naked and shivering.

"Okay, you take him," the man holding him said. "Tell you what. Give him to Cormy — he knows just how to hook the bigger ones."

Moments later, Cole was looking at a big man with huge moles on his face. He smiled at Cole. "Tell ya what, kid, I ain't gonna hit any of

your organs or arteries, or anything. It'll hurt, but you'll be okay, I promise."

The man put a very large hook through Cole's right shoulder. The excruciating pain made him pass out for a little while.

Then he awoke to big hands slapping his face.

"Kid! Hey, *kid!*" one of the men shouted at him. "You gotta be awake for this, okay? You gotta be awake and kickin'!"

Once Cole was alert and crying out for help — while the other men laughed and mocked him — one of the big men wrapped his thick arms around Cole — sending unbelievable tendrils of pain from his shoulder through his entire body — lifted him, and threw him over the side of the boat and into the water.

Beneath the water, he held his breath, with his cheeks puffed out like little balloons on each side. The pain was still unbearable, but he was more interested in breathing.

Then he began to thrash and kick.

He found the surface, got his head above it and cried, "Help me! Please help me help me help me — "

Through bleary, watery eyes, he saw the men looking over the edge of the boat, grinning and laughing at him.

"Go get 'em, boy!" one of the men shouted with a laugh in his voice.

He went under again, quite unexpectedly, still kicking and flailing, with his mouth closed and his eyes open. And he saw it

The shark.

Coming up from the darkness below, aimed directly at him, its predatory, dead-black eyes staring, its teeth showing in its half-open mouth, all of them, rows and rows of sharp, crooked razors.

His own blood clouded the water around him until the silent predator looked like some nightmarish ghost coming closer.

Cole let out his breath, screaming under water as the shark came closer and closer . . .

. . . closer and closer . . .

Nine

God's Work

FOR DONALD WILDMON, WHO LIKES TO CALL HIMSELF "REVEREND"

Pastor Gil Freeman stood near the back of his church's multi-purpose room, watching as only a handful of people gathered for the after-services potluck. The room was usually filled by now, humming with voices and redolent with the smells of casseroles and lasagnas, pies and cobblers. But now, it looked bare and the few dishes that had been brought were not enough to fill the room with their warm aromas.

There were well over a dozen long rectangular tables set up with metal folding chairs lined along the sides, but they were empty today. Those who had shown up would barely fill two of them.

Most of the people there were the older members of the congregation, the stooped and wrinkled, with cloudy, but still-sparkling eyes above smiles that had weathered years of heartache and yet did not fade. They were the only ones who had tried to make Pastor Freeman feel welcome when he'd first come to this church nearly two months ago and now they were the only ones keeping him from feeling completely rejected by his congregation. He was very grateful to have them there.

The others — the middle-aged and even younger — had been suspicious of him. They seemed to think he was too . . . *soft*, too gentle. He was young — he'd be thirty-two in a month — and soft-spoken and his sermons were quiet and calm rather than loud and charismatic. But he'd learned not long after his arrival that this congregation was an angry one, angry at the world for its sins and

offenses — which they seemed to take personally — and they wanted someone in the pulpit who would share their anger and give it a booming voice.

But Pastor Freeman did not, and today they were displaying their disappointment in him more openly than they had before. They had shown him first during that morning's sermon, and now they were driving the point home by not coming to the potluck.

Even worse than their absence was the fact that Pastor Freeman knew where they were . . . and why. He knew what they were doing, and it was tying his gut into knots.

He did not see his wife Deborah approaching from his right and was startled when she took his hand, but he quickly smiled.

"Nope, that smile doesn't fool me," she whispered.

"What?"

"You look like you're developing an ulcer over here." She squeezed his hand. "You shouldn't let it bother you so much. You're going to wrinkle early if you keep frowning like that."

"I know," he sighed, "but . . . I keep thinking I should've said something else, that I could've kept it from happening! If I'd just said the right thing this morning."

"Honey, your sermon was fine. It was *powerful*. In fact, it was the best sermon I've ever heard you deliver. But their minds were set on this. They were determined. There was nothing you could do, no matter what you said to them."

He shook his head. "What if these are the only people who show up for church next week?" he asked, nodding his head at the small but cheerful group beginning to fill their plates at the other end of the room.

"So? Remember what He said? About wherever two or more are gathered?"

He nodded slowly.

"Are you going to come join us, Gil?"

"In a minute, sweetheart."

"Well, don't be long. The kids are worried about you. They wanted to know what was wrong with Daddy, why he looked so 'weird'"

Pastor Freeman smiled. "Tell them I'm fine, and I'll be there in a minute."

He was a tall man, so she had to stand on tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek as she rubbed a hand over his back, then she joined the others across the room.

Pastor Freeman paced a bit, then leaned his back against the wall near the window that looked out on the parking lot. The nearly empty parking lot.

Yes, he knew where they were. He could imagine what they were doing at that very moment. He looked at his watch. They had no doubt gathered and were waiting.

That poor man, he thought. That poor, poor man.

He closed his eyes, rubbed them with thumb and forefinger and thought about that morning's sermon, wondering if there was something he could have done differently . . . something that would have prevented what had happened . . . and what was no doubt *going* to happen . . .

The faces that looked up at Pastor Freeman as he stood at the pulpit were not pleasant ones. Their jaws were set, their lips were firm; there were no smiles — except, of course, from the older members of the congregation, who had lived long enough to know that their God and their happiness were all they had to cling to — only stern faces that seemed to want all of this over with so they could get on with their plans for the day.

He knew what those plans were. That was why he had decided this morning's sermon would be unlike all the others, all those quiet, gentle sermons he'd given over the previous weeks of which these people seemed to disapprove so much.

He put his Bible on the pulpit, placed a hand on each of the cold, wooden edges, locked his elbows and leaned forward, smiling.

"I decided to scrap the sermon I'd planned for this week," he said as quietly as usual. "I began working on it early in the week, but then I said to myself, 'Gil, this isn't the sermon you need to give. The one you need to give is . . . a bit harder. It has more of an edge.' And that was very true. But I want you to know that I am saying what I'm about to say this morning out of concern, and nothing more. Not out of anger, not with condemnation, but with deep, sincere concern for my church family.

"I know that you have not been completely . . . *satisfied* with me as your pastor. For that I am truly sorry. Honestly, I have done my best, and will continue to do so. I hope that you will give me a chance. And I hope that you will keep in mind that I am having to give you a chance as well. Because I know about something you are planning to do. Today, in fact. And it's something of which I do not approve. But my approval means nothing. The important thing is God's approval, and, to tell you the truth . . . I think God is hanging His head over what you plan to do today."

His mouth was cotton-dry, but he'd anticipated that; he reached down to the glass of water he'd put beneath the top of the pulpit, took a sip, then a deep breath, and continued.

"I've heard the whispers," he said, his voice a little louder now, a little more authoritative. "I've heard the talk about what's to happen today. It's been difficult not to. I've been saddened by the eagerness in your voices, by the joy in your eyes as you talk about what you plan to do.

"I know about the writer. I know about James K. Denmore. I know about his books. In fact, when I heard all the talk going on among you, I went out and bought one of them. I read it. And I wonder . . . how many of *you* have read his work? I wonder only because you are apparently so angry about what he writes. If you have *not* read his work, then your anger is not righteous indignation. It is the ugliest kind of hypocrisy. But I am giving you the benefit of the doubt and will assume that you *have* read it and, having read it myself, I understand your anger.

"The publishing industry calls it 'erotic horror', and that's fine. They need labels to separate their books in the bookstores. But I was, I must admit, offended. I found the book distasteful in the extreme. Although it was obvious to me that Mr. Denmore is a terribly talented and gifted man, I felt, after reading that book, that he was selling himself short by using his talent to write such a book.

"But . . . I don't *know* Mr. Denmore. I've never *met* him. I've never sat down with Mr. Denmore and had a long heart-to-heart conversation. I don't know what he believes. I don't know what experiences his life has given him, I don't know *why* he writes what he writes. I don't know where it comes from or what has brought him to the point where he puts such things on paper. So. To me . . . Mr. Denmore is just

another person. I feel no differently about Mr. Denmore — even after reading his book — than I feel about any of you. He is a human being. He is still — no matter what *any* of us feels about him — a child of God . . . Just like the rest of us.”

He shifted his weight from foot to foot, put the side of a fist to his mouth and cleared his throat, then went on.

“As I said, the man is talented. The Bible tells us that talents are given to us by God. Therefore, Mr. Denmore’s considerable writing talent was given to him by God. *But*. . . God left it up to him as to how he would use it. Because God, from the beginning of time, from the Garden of Eden onward, has given us the freedom of choice. He values our free will just as much as *we* should because He knows that without that free will, we are nothing more than slaves. And the Bible is filled with examples of that, filled with events in which God stood back and left the choices open to humankind. More often than not, they made the *wrong* choice, but it was *their* choice because He left it up to *them*.

“Sometimes, however, we *forget* that. We take it upon ourselves to impose on others what we feel is God’s will. And that, my friends . . . that is *terribly*, terribly wrong.”

Pastor Freeman’s heart was pounding nervously against his ribs and he was finding it difficult to control his breath, because the faces looking up at him were growing darker; they were becoming angrier and more upset with each word he spoke. He swallowed hard and, after a long moment of nervous silence, he finally continued . . .

Pastor Freeman blinked his eyes several times, bringing himself out of his thoughts, and headed across the multi-purpose room. He’d decided what he had to do.

He went to his wife’s side and said, “Deb, honey, I’m going to take off for a little while.”

Her smile fell away and she looked suddenly worried. “Why? Where are you going?”

“Down to the bookstore. I just . . . I want to do what I can.”

She sighed and shook her head. “Do you really feel like you have to do this?”

He nodded. “Please tell everyone that I’ll be back soon.”

“Okay.”

He leaned down and gave her a kiss, then started out toward the parking lot. Voices called out. "You leaving us, Pastor?" "Where're *you* off to?" "Aren't you hungry?"

As he slipped on his coat and put a small Bible in his coat pocket, he smiled, waved and called, "I'll be back in just a little while. Enjoy yourselves."

Outside, he got into his car, started it up and headed across town toward the bookstore, praying silently that he was doing the right thing . . . and that he had done the right thing at the pulpit that morning . . .

"When God put that tree in the Garden of Eden — the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil — he didn't put it there for aesthetics. It was there for a very good reason. It was there to give His two creations, His two children, Adam and Eve, a choice. He told them not to eat of that tree because, if they did, death would come to them as surely as they breathed. Not right away, necessarily . . . but it would come eventually. But He left that door open to them, He gave them that choice. He did not *have* to let them choose. He could have *made* them devoted to Him if He'd wanted. Like robots. But would that have been the right thing? No. That would have made them nothing more than automatons, forced to love and worship Him. Their actions would have held no sincerity, no heartfelt love. And if you've been in love, then you know that true love comes only out of free will. It *cannot* be forced. So He put that tree right there in the garden with them. And, unfortunately . . . they made the wrong choice.

"But it was *their* choice!" Pastor Freeman shouted, startling many of the people seated in the pews. "God left it up to *them*! He made them believe nothing, He *made* them do nothing! And," he said, his voice quieter now, "when they made that wrong choice, as disappointed as He was, He loved them no less. Their exile from the garden was a result of their own actions, but God stayed with them and watched over them. They were still, after all, His children.

"He does the same with us as He's done throughout history. He wants *us* to choose the direction our lives take. Those who are saved have chosen their salvation of their own free will. They have chosen how to live their lives.

Those who are lost have chosen to turn their backs on God . . . for whatever reason. He doesn't *make* us accept and love Him . . . He leaves it up to us and *hopes* that we will."

He took another sip of water. Beads of sweat were beginning to gather just above his upper lip and he removed a handkerchief from his pocket to dab them away.

"Are we wiser than God?" he asked then, his voice firm, his eyes stern as they swept over the congregation. "Do we know better than He? Were you and I put here on this earth by our Heavenly Father to decide what others should and shouldn't do? What they should and shouldn't read or look at or listen to?"

"I've learned about the other protests this church was involved in before I came. I know that you went to an art gallery showing an exhibit of photographs by a very controversial artist. I'm familiar with that artist's work and, once again, I understand your disapproval. But I do *not* understand your anger!" he shouted, pounding a fist on the pulpit and making some of them jerk in their pews. "That kind of disapproval should be accompanied by sadness and — just as God does with us when we make the wrong choice — with continuing love and forgiveness. But windows were *broken!* A door was *destroyed!* Arrests were made! Dear God, what kind of behavior is *that?* Not Christian behavior. Not *loving* behavior! *Certainly* not the kind of behavior God has shown His stubborn and frustrating children throughout the centuries . . . or the kind of behavior *He* expects His children to show each *other.*"

He used the handkerchief to dab his forehead this time.

"I know about your visit to the Civic Auditorium on the night of a concert given by a particularly offensive rap group about which I'm sure I feel the same as you. But was that behavior necessary? Was *that* the *right* thing to *do?* In front of all those TV cameras? In front of all those young people who, now more than *ever*, need examples of true Christian love?"

There was a rather loud mumble in the congregation, a voice of dissent that apparently decided, after a moment, to remain silent.

"I know about your occasional gatherings at one of the local clinics that performs abortions where, I understand, the women going into the clinic had garbage *thrown* at them and were called murderers. *Murderers!* Maybe you remember an incident in the Bible in which a

group of righteously indignant people caught a woman in the act of committing adultery. They went to Jesus to ask what He thought should be done with her, reminding Him that the law instructed them to stone her to death for her crime. Is *that* what He thought they should do, they wondered? And He told them, 'He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.' Well, they thought about that a second, then they did exactly what they *should* have done: *they high-tailed it out of there!* Why? Because there wasn't a man standing there who was without sin."

He leaned far over the pulpit. "So. What about you? Are *you* without sin? Do you have the right to stand in judgment of an artist or his admirers? Is your slate clean enough to allow you to angrily stand between a rap group and their fans? Are you sinless enough to accuse a young woman on her way to have an abortion — and going through what is probably the toughest, most painful time of her life — of *murder*? Are you?" He shouted his next words as he pounded a fist atop the pulpit again. "*No, you are not!* And to behave as if you are is a misrepresentation of Christianity and a *slap in the face of God!* If Jesus Christ were present at that clinic, He would stand between you and those women and shout, 'Let those of you without sin first cast a piece of trash at her! Let those of *you* who've never done anything wrong call her a *murderer!* Let those of *you* who are *perfect* pass *judgment* on her!'"

"Jesus Christ came to this earth to live a sinless and loving life . . . a life in which He, the Son of *God*, judged no one. Even *He* said, in the book of John, chapter 12, 'And if any man hear my words, and believe not, I judge him not: for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.' Why? Because only his father — *God!* — can judge anyone. Jesus Himself admitted that. He gave no one reason to feel guilt or self-hatred — unless they chose to do so on their *own* — and it wasn't easy, because He was just as human as you and I and I'm sure He wanted to break a few windows and destroy a few doors and maybe even kick the seats of a few pants. The only time He did anything remotely *close* to that was when money-changers used his Father's temple as a place of business — crooked, sleazy business — and that, as I'm sure you can understand, was just too *much!* And even then, He hurt no one; He just made his feelings known."

He stopped, sighed, scratched the back of his neck, then continued:

“But He came to suffer a horrible death for the lovingness He offered so that we could have an example, so that we could have someone to turn to and to lean on when our lives on this earth became too tough. So that we would have someone who could say He knew what it was like and forgive us our mistakes.

“But *you* have taken that life and made it a mockery with your anger toward those with whom you don’t agree. To the people you *should* be showing love and acceptance you are only showing anger and hatred! To people you don’t even *know* or *understand*! And you should be *ashamed* of yourselves!”

He pulled out the handkerchief again and swept it over his entire face, trying to catch his breath and calm the trembling in his hands. And then something happened, something that, in his short time as a pastor, he had never experienced.

The congregation began to stand up and talk back . . .

That perspiration began to return as Pastor Freeman drove, thinking about that sermon, about what it had eventually become, about the chaos that had filled his church, about which he felt so guilty.

He was nearing the bookstore and his palms were sticky against the steering wheel as he grew increasingly anxious. What would he find? What would be happening when he arrived? And, most importantly, what in the world would he *do*?

He had no idea. He just knew that he had to try to do *something*.

The bookstore was on the corner of a very busy intersection and it was difficult to find a parking place, but when he drove by, he saw the crowd. There were sixty, maybe seventy people — perhaps even more — gathered on the sidewalk out front that was lined with small maples. He recognized those from his congregation and saw that people had come from many other churches in town. He sighed heavily as he looked for a parking place. He found one half a block away and had to walk back to the store. The voices grew louder the closer he got and they made him hurt inside; they were so angry, so hateful and condemning . . . and at the same time, so gleeful in their hostility, as if they were swishing it around in their mouths like a fine wine that needed savoring.

Most of them held handwritten signs that called James K. Denmore a pornographer, a Satanist, a follower of demons, among other things. The signs accused him of polluting young minds, of promoting violence and perversion . . . of offending God.

The signs made Pastor Freeman's chest ache.

He was disappointed to see that there were no police officers on hand to maintain order. He knew what groups like this could do, what they could become — he'd gotten a small taste of it in church that day — and he'd hoped there would be someone around to make sure things didn't get out of hand. The fact that there wasn't made him a little afraid. He was suddenly seized by a horrible feeling of dread in his chest, a feeling of what this might become, and he stopped a moment on the sidewalk, closed his eyes for just a few seconds and prayed silently, *Please take my hand here. Lord, I need your help.*

He pressed on until a pair of eyes in the group met his and registered first surprise at his arrival, then darkened with hostile determination. It was a woman, Deanna Furst, a middle-aged widow with short beauty parlor curls, whose body was thickening with age and who wore the simplest of clothes and, always, sensible shoes. She held a sign that read:

QUOTE JAMES K. DENMORE:
PERVERTER OF CHILDREN
DISCIPLE OF SATAN
OFFENDER OF GOD

Pastor Freeman flinched when he read the sign and Deanna saw his reaction. She curled one end of her mouth into a little smirk, enjoying his displeasure. She had been one of the louder and more vehemently dissenting voices during his sermon that morning, so he wasn't at all surprised.

Then others began to notice him and the voices calmed somewhat as eyes turned to him and widened.

Fred Granger, who had obviously gone home and changed into what was, for him, a standard uniform: plaid shirt, khaki jacket

and jeans. He drove a pick-up truck with a rifle always on the rack over the back window. A green canvas bag hung heavily from his shoulder and he carried a sign with shaky, hand-painted letters that read:

DENMORE IS EVIL
AND SATANIC
'THOU SHALT NOT SUFFER
A WITCH TO LIVE!'
EXODUS 22:18

His face was twisted into the same mask of dark anger it had been ever since Pastor Freeman had met him. His wife stood behind him, a frail looking woman in a simple baggy housedress. Her head was bowed and she stared at the concrete, holding a baby in one arm and clutching the hand of the toddler boy; she was enormously pregnant.

Sam Bigelow, a tall, heavy man with a sad face, saw him and looked confused at first, then smiled, perhaps thinking that he had come to join them in their protest.

David and Karen Potter, an attractive, thirtyish couple, saw him, glanced at one another, then continued to stare at him with expressionless faces as he approached.

Madison Kent did a double-take when he saw the pastor and stared in disbelief as he drew closer. He held a sign that read:

JAMES K. DENMORE'S BOOKS
TEACH EVIL, CORRUPTION
AND SEXUAL PROMISCUITY

His face grew hard as Pastor Freeman approached.

There were others, too.

Marcus Benworth, a single black man who sang in the church choir. He held no sign but stared at Pastor Freeman as if he were coming up the sidewalk naked.

Sally Morrissey saw him, too, and her face showed a shadow of guilt — a young, single woman in her mid-twenties whose face

conveyed friendship and warmth . . . except for that moment when she saw Pastor Freeman — and she lowered her eyes from his and turned away so he couldn't see the sign she held, which read:

JAMES K. DENMORE'S BOOKS
DESTROY MORALS AND
GIVE SATAN FREE REIGN

Michael Denny, who had been dating Sally for a short while and was about her age, did not have a sign, but when he saw Pastor Freeman, his eyebrows rose as if he were asking himself, *And exactly what would he be doing here today?*

There were others from his congregation. They saw him and responded with their eyes, with their movements. No one reacted positively. No one welcomed him.

No one wanted him there.

There were many others as well, not only people from his congregation — all of whom he recognized, all of whom stared at him with disapproving eyes — but people from other churches who were in agreement with those who thought it right to protest the presence of James K. Denmore in this bookstore, people who also thought they were doing the general public a favor by running out of town on a rail, so to speak, a writer whom they felt was endangering so many readers.

Pastor Freeman found it impossible not to grind his teeth together as he walked straight into the crowd.

No one spoke to him. No one acknowledged his presence once he had joined them.

Pastor Freeman removed the small Bible from his pocket, opened it, took a deep breath, sent up another silent prayer, then lifted an arm slowly and said loudly, "Would you all please listen to me for just a moment!"

A bitter murmur passed through the crowd.

"Please, for just a moment," he said, turning around and passing his eyes over all of them, known and unknown, trying to sound pleasant.

When silence finally came — just a moment of silence — he took advantage of it and looked down briefly at his Bible to make sure the words in his head were right.

“And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but perceivest not the beam that is in thine own eye?” Those are the words of Jesus from the book of Luke. Do you know what a mote is? It’s a tiny speck. Do you know what a beam is? It’s a log. The *trunk* of a *tree*! I have come here to ask you just one question: what *gives* you the *right* to *come* here and tell this man that he is *wrong*. . . that he is *evil*. . . when *each* and *every* one of you *here* are *just* as human and *just* as much a *sin-ner* as he? What *gives* you that *right*?”

There was a long moment of silence, then:

“He’s *spreading* his sinfulness!” Deanna Furst shouted.

“He’s *selling* it!” Karen Potter shouted. “He’s handing it out to people who don’t *know* any better!”

“Then it’s your job to *tell* them better!” Pastor Freeman shouted back. “It’s *not* your job to decide what they can *read*! That’s *not* why God put you here! That’s not what God wants you to *do* for Him!”

“How do you *know*?”

“I know because the *entire* Bible — from *beginning* to *end* — tells me so! And it tells you so, too, so *you* should feel *ashamed*, by your behavior here today. *All* of you should feel ashamed! Every single *one* of you!”

Voices rose then, angry voices accompanied by angry eyes. The voices shouted at him bitterly, angrily, as if he had insulted them personally, as if he had said foul things about members of their family.

“I’m terribly sorry if I sound angry. I certainly don’t mean to. Many of you don’t even know me. I’m Pastor — ”

“We know who you are, Pastor Freeman.” It was a deep, unfamiliar voice, rich and full, and the speaker stepped forward, shouldering his way through the crowd. “We’ve heard all about you.”

He was of average height, but still imposing, with a barrel chest and a large belly that filled out his dark suit. His greying hair was balding on top and he wore a pair of large-framed tortoise-shell glasses. A waddle of skin hung beneath his chin and jiggled as he moved. He clutched a Bible at his side and he did not look pleased. His eyes were stern and his mouth was a straight line across his fleshy face.

"I'm Reverend Perry Wickes from the Celebration of Christ Church across town, Pastor Freeman," he said, "and I must say I'm very disappointed in you. I could understand some church members not wanting to participate in a protest like this. In fact, I always expect a few to stay away. But you? A pastor? The *leader* of your congregation? I don't understand it, and I think you've failed your church." He paused, his eyes glaring, jowls trembling with anger. "And your God."

"I'm sorry to hear that you think that of me, Reverend. But for me to support this, I would have to go against my beliefs. Against what I believe my God wants me to do."

Reverend Wickes pointed a stiff, meaty index finger at Pastor Freeman and bellowed, "Then you are *not* a man of *God!* You are a friend of darkness!"

In spite of himself, Pastor Freeman nearly laughed out loud at the melodramatic accusation, but before he had a chance, there was a stir in the crowd as three people rounded the corner of the bookstore and came down the sidewalk.

The first was a very large muscular man who did not look terribly friendly. The second, a beautiful woman in her thirties who was holding the hand of a man Pastor Freeman recognized immediately from the pictures on his book jackets: James K. Denmore. He looked very youthful — though he was thirty-eight — and very vulnerable, with a pale, childlike face and wide, curious eyes. He was tall and slender with long, thick brown hair and a mustache. He certainly did not appear to be the evil monster Pastor Freeman's congregation had made him out to be.

As Denmore and his companions approached, the crowd turned to them and held their signs high as they began to shout at him.

"Pornographer!"

"How would you like your child to read what you write?"

"Your books are satanic!"

"Immoral!"

"Perverted!"

Denmore seemed to take the shouting in stride, though his brows curled downward above his eyes; he had obviously encountered it before. The woman beside him did the same. But the large man — probably a bodyguard, Pastor Freeman decided — quickened his pace and moved forward.

That was when a large white van with the call letters of a local television station painted on the side came to a stop, double-parking in front of the bookstore.

“Oh, no,” Pastor Freeman breathed, rolling his eyes.

The shouting grew worse as the burly man moved forward quickly, holding out an arm to clear a path for Denmore and his companion. Pastor Freeman could not believe the things he was hearing from members of his congregation — from any of the people around him, for that matter. He prayed silently and quickly for the strength to resist the burning anger rising in his chest, but he couldn’t do it. He stepped forward, held up both arms and shouted, “Stop! *Stop* this! This is *wrong*! This is — ”

Reverend Wickes stepped forward quickly and slapped a hand onto Pastor Freeman’s chest, pushing him backward as he growled through clenched teeth, “Stay out of this. You’re no part of this. You have no business here.”

“I have a *lot* of business here, and I’ll thank you to take your hand off me.”

“Some of your people told me about your little show in the pulpit this morning and I think it’s shameful. But *they* think it’s bad enough to start a campaign to have you ousted from the church — and after only two months as their pastor. No, Pastor Freeman,” he chuckled coldly, “you have *no* business here!”

As the shouting continued, their eyes locked for a long moment. Then Pastor Freeman said, “I don’t live my life according to your opinion, or according to *popular* opinion. I live it according to *God’s* opinion. You do what you feel is best for your congregation — ” He pushed Reverend Wickes’ hand from his chest. “ — and I’ll do what I feel is best for mine.”

Pastor Freeman turned away from him, unconcerned about what his reaction might be, and turned back to the crowd, which was still shouting epithets at the approaching writer.

Denmore walked into the crowd with his head held high, trying, unsuccessfully, to smile, his hand still holding the hand of the beautiful woman with him.

“*Stop* this!” Pastor Freeman shouted. “You have no *right* to judge this man! Even Christ *Himself* said He could not judge others! Only *God* has the right to judge us!”

Denmore froze as he walked into the path that his bodyguard had opened in the crowd and turned to Pastor Freeman with a look of surprise on his face. He smiled, and his smile was a warm and pleasant one.

"Thank you very much," he said to Pastor Freeman. "I really appreciate that. Who are you?"

Pastor Freeman — rather surprised himself — returned the smile and reached out his hand to shake as he said, "I'm Pastor Gil Freeman."

Denmore raised his hand to shake then stopped halfway, shocked. "Pastor? You're a *pastor*?"

Pastor Freeman nodded.

"And you're *defending* me?"

The crowd fell silent, waiting for Pastor Freeman's response.

As they shook hands, Pastor Freeman thought fast, praying for the right thing to say. "I don't agree with what you write. But you're a human being just as I am, and my beliefs make me no better than you . . . and I don't think you should have to undergo the treatment you're getting today. I hope you'll forgive these people for their behavior."

Denmore's smile broadened into a grin and he said, with great enthusiasm, "Thank you. Thank you very *much*! You're a good person, Pastor, a very good person, and it's very nice to meet you." He grinned at Pastor Denmore a moment longer, then turned and headed into the bookstore again.

The crowd broke into a loud burst of accusations and denunciations aimed not only at the writer but at Pastor Freeman as well.

As Denmore and his friends left, he found himself surrounded by hateful faces, burning eyes, mouths with lips pulled back over teeth that snapped up and down as bitter words were shouted; knuckles were white as they held their signs, pumping them up and down again and again. Pastor Freeman realized with a tingle of fright that many of those snapping, sneering faces were directed not at Denmore . . . but at *him*.

Suddenly, Reverend Wickes appeared before him and his large, fleshy face consumed Pastor Freeman's field of vision, pearls of sweat clinging to the red-splotched, trembling cheeks.

"Well?" he barked. "Do you still want to stay here? Where you're not *wanted*? Where you don't *belong*?"

"I'm not going anywhere, Reverend."

Half his mouth curled into an unpleasant smile. "Maybe not right now. But we'll see come Judgment Day."

A heavy, bearded man stepped out of the bookstore then wearing slacks and a sport coat, and raised a hand, shouting firmly, "Please, could you listen a moment, *please!*" When things calmed down a bit, he said, "My name is Mr. Bailey, I'm the manager of this bookstore, and I'd like to ask you — no, no . . . I'm *telling* you that if you do not calm down and clear this doorway *immediately* I'm calling the police and having you all arrested. Is that understood? *Arrested!*"

Nothing. They were silent. Only their eyes spoke wordless anger and hatred. Slowly, they began to back away.

Mr. Bailey nodded. "Thank you. But I won't speak to you a second time. You're welcome to protest. But if you don't keep it peaceful, I'll go *straight* to the phone." He went back inside.

Reverend Wickes stepped forward and said to them, "Just spread out for now and hold your signs high. When the people begin coming to see him . . . well, we'll deal with that when it happens."

Pastor Freeman stood at the very edge of the curb and watched them as the pit of his stomach burned as if he'd swallowed hot coals.

And they watched him as they paced back and forth with their signs, eyes bitter, mouths twisted angrily, hatefully.

Seeing those faces took him back once again to that morning's sermon . . .

"The Bible says to resist sin!" Deanna Furst suddenly shouted, standing from her pew. "It says to *fight* it! It says to '*take up the armor of God*' to fight it!"

Pastor Freeman froze for a moment, eyes wide. He was not used to members of the congregation standing up and shouting at him. But he gathered his thoughts quickly and shouted, "No, no, God means for us to take up His armor and fight *temptation!* The temptation that comes to each and every one of us and tries to drag us *into* sin! *Personal* temptation! We have no right, no moral *room* to worry about the sins of *others* — we've got too many of our *own!* God did not intend for us to take up His armor simply to *disagree* with others!"

“But this man, this — this *writer*,” she spat disdainfully, “is presenting a *temptation* to others! He is making himself a stumbling block to *others!*”

As much as he hated it, Pastor Freeman felt hot anger welling up in his chest. He clenched his teeth and pounded his fist on the pulpit as he shouted, “You should not worry about the stumbling block *he* is being to *others!* You should worry — and worry hard — about the stumbling block you are being to others by *behaving* the way you *behave* when you exhibit the absolutely *savage* behavior you’ve exhibited in the name of God at these *reprehensible* protests which you *insist* on holding again and *again!*”

Deanna Furst remained standing, her lips pressed hard together and her fists clenched at her sides.

Madison Kent shot to his feet suddenly and shouted, “How can you condone what that man writes?”

“I do *not* condone what that man writes!” Pastor Freeman shouted back. “But I do not *condemn* that man, *either!*”

“But what he writes is polluting minds!” Kent responded, his fists clenching as well.

“If that’s so, then he is polluting minds that are *choosing* to be polluted! Your job is to reach those minds *first*, to show them the Christian love you were put here to show others, to introduce them to Christ and what He represented, *that’s* what you’re supposed to be doing! You’re supposed to *live* your beliefs to others, not shove them down people’s throats! Because even if you stamp out James K. Denmore, someone *else* will come along who will write the *exact* same stuff, and there will be *just* as many people who want to buy his books. Or *her* books! Because you haven’t tried to reach *them!* The *readers*, the people out there! And what will you do there? Ruin the next person? And the *next* and the *next*? Would you feel good about that? *Would* you?”

“Yes!” someone shouted.

And someone else cried, “Yes!”

Then another, and another, until a chorus of “Yes!” rose from the congregation.

“Let me quote from the Bible,” Pastor Freeman said tremulously, trying to control his anger. “Matthew 7:1: ‘Judge not, that ye be not judged.’ In other words, do you want God to judge you as harshly as

you are judging James K. Denmore? Because if He *did*, how would you hold up? Would you do any better than he? Or would you do *worse*? Because, frankly, I think that if God judged *me* that harshly, *I* would not do well at all, no matter *how* hard I've tried throughout my life! I'm just thankful to know that He won't. Because I refuse to judge others simply by what they do. I don't know what's in their *minds*, what's in their *hearts*!"

"But that verse means we shouldn't judge other Christians!" a voice shouted.

Pastor Freeman's eyes widened and his brows rose; he was genuinely shocked. "You think it only applies to other *Christians*? Where does it say *that*? Do you really believe God was that narrow-minded?"

"He put us here to fight evil!" another voice shouted.

"He put us here to fight the evil that plagues each *one* of us, *individually*, our own sins and temptations. Not those of *others*!" Pastor Freeman shouted.

"You're a *disgrace* to your *position*!" Deanna Furst screamed. "You're not a *preacher*, you're a *traitor*! You should hang your head in *shame* for the things you're saying!"

"I'll hold my head high," he said, his voice low and mouth close to the microphone, "because I know that what I'm saying is true. I know that because of what the Bible tells me."

And then the voices *really* cried out at him. They shouted angrily, as if what he'd said had been a personal insult, and Pastor Freeman had to fight not to shrink away from their angry cries . . .

They were calm for a while as they moved up and down the sidewalk, even around the corner and back and forth in front of the bookstore's large display window where a sign read:

JAMES K. DENMORE IN PERSON!
AUTHOR OF "*LUST AND THE DEVIL*"
HERE! TODAY! 2:00 p.m. — 4:00 p.m.

Pastor Freeman knew they were waiting for their prey: whoever might show up to have their books signed by an author whose work they enjoyed. Did those readers have any idea what awaited them?

How would they feel, on their way home with their autographed books, about the “Christians” who would shout at them and ridicule them on their way in and out of the bookstore? Would they go away laughing at the Bible, at Christ and His life . . . at the entire institution of Christianity?

He turned to one of the maples, Bible still held in his right hand, and leaned his head gently against its narrow trunk as he sighed.

Voices rose around the corner. The shouting began again and Pastor Freeman turned away from the tree to look.

Two couples — in their late twenties or perhaps early thirties — rounded the corner, each with books tucked under his or her arm, their faces registering shock and more than a little fear at the hostile crowd around them. The signs were pumped up and down again, shouting voices quoted Bible verses and accused them of patronizing a follower of Satan. The two couples had to push through the protesters on their way to the door.

Pastor Freeman rushed forward and pulled the door open, and smiled at the two men and two women as they neared. “I’m terribly sorry,” he said as they passed, “and I hope you’ll forgive them for their mistake.”

They froze and looked at him. Their eyes looked down at the Bible in his right hand and suddenly looked surprised as they looked back at him. One of the men smiled hesitantly, then fully, and nodded as he said, “Thank you very much.” They went inside.

Pastor Freeman turned to the crowd and, as the saying went . . . if looks could kill. Their eyes stabbed him, again and again. He’d never seen so many teeth in his life.

Then, as if a signal had been given, people began coming in crowds. James K. Denmore was, after all, a best-selling author. Millions of copies of his books had been sold in many languages. Three of them had been made into hit movies, one into a popular cable mini-series. It was no surprise that so many people were coming. In fact, when he arrived, Pastor Freeman had been surprised to find that they weren’t waiting for the author to get there.

When the people began to arrive — some with books, some without — the crowd went over the edge, and suddenly, in a sickening

flood of vivid, red-tinted memory, Pastor Freeman was taken back to the end of that morning's nightmarish sermon . . .

Fred Granger suddenly shot up, standing tall among the angry congregation in his ill-fitting suit. Beside him, his pregnant wife held the baby in one arm and the hand of their toddler beside her, her hair somewhat disheveled.

"God said in the book of Exodus," and then he shouted the rest at the top of his lungs, "'*Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live!*' And what he writes is evil! It's *supernatural!* He writes about *witchcraft!* About *devil worship!*'"

Pastor Freeman could not contain a nervous laugh. "You're saying we should *kill* him?" The very words made his blood run cold.

"I'm not saying that!" Granger cried, spittle flying from his mouth as he cut the air with a fist. "The *Bible* is saying it!"

"But that was — " He closed his eyes a moment, raised his arms and shouted, "*Please, everyone, calm down!* Listen for a moment! The verse you quoted, Fred, came from the Old Testament, early on in the Old Testament. During that time, God spoke directly to the people. *He* handed down the laws, *He* made the decisions and the people carried them out. Things have changed since then. Does God talk to us and make our decisions for us? It would be nice, but it doesn't happen anymore. That's why Christ came. He wanted to let us know we were on our own. He wanted to give us an example with His life, so we would know how we should treat one another. I'm not dismissing the Old Testament, not at all, because it's very important . . . I'm just saying we're not *living* in the Old Testament now. God doesn't speak to us from mountains or clouds anymore and *we*, as *Christians*, are left to carry on His message . . . Christ's message. Christ is not here anymore, so we are the examples. *We* Christians are here to bring others into the fold and to tell them that what we have on this earth is not all there is . . . that the creator of the universe loves each and every one of us and is concerned about how we live our lives. We are *not* here to shout and scream at them and break their windows and condemn them for their behavior!"

It grew worse then. People began to leave. They picked up their children, their purses, their Bibles, and began to walk

Fred Granger pointed a stiff finger at Pastor Freeman and screamed — he didn't shout, he *screamed* — “You're gonna die for what you said, you unnerstand me? You're gonna *buuurrrn!* God's gonna *fryyyy* you!” Then he reached down, grabbed his wife's arm and jerked her to her feet. Her head remained down, eyes staring at her feet as she followed her furious husband out of the pew, pulling the tiny boy behind her.

Then, with the exception of a scant few, everyone stood and began to leave.

“Please wait!” Pastor Freeman cried. “*Please!* We need to talk some more!” He raised his arms. “Where are you *going?* We should *settle* this!”

They continued to stand and leave their pews . . . but they hadn't quite left yet . . .

Pastor Freeman tried to do the same for all the other people that he'd done for the first four: holding the door open and apologizing for the behavior, smiling at them, trying to make them feel better after the attack they'd endured coming in.

But that didn't last long.

The crowd of protesters grew louder and more frantic as more and more people came to the bookstore and were greeted pleasantly by Pastor Freeman after passing through the gauntlet of signs and shouting.

The number of people in the bookstore grew and the line at his table became longer and longer.

Pastor Freeman continued to greet Denmore's fans with a friendly smile, asking them to excuse the crowd for their behavior.

The time came when they could take his behavior no longer, and the crowd of protesters began to follow the people into the bookstore. They went in just a few at a time; those with signs handed them to others, leaving them outside, and crowded around the long table where James K. Denmore sat signing books, the woman and the large body-guard standing behind him.

Pastor Freeman was horrified. He followed them in, entering the bookstore right behind Fred Granger with his wife, baby and child . . . and his heavy-hanging canvas shoulder bag.

He positioned himself between the table and the crowd and said, as quietly as possible — because the bookstore was such a quiet place — “Stop this. Please, *please* stop this. What you're doing is *wrong.*”

“No, no,” Fred Granger said, stepping forward, his bag swinging from his shoulder, “*you’re doin’ wrong*, Pastor. Fact, you’re not even a pastor . . . yer a *traitor*. You shouldn’t even be here.”

“What you don’t understand, Fred, is that I *need* to be here, because you’re doing something terribly wrong. You’re judging a man when you should be accepting.”

Fred’s face darkened, grew angrier, and gave Pastor Freeman a scowl that chilled him to the bone.

“Please, Fred,” Pastor Freeman said quietly, “understand that I don’t mean to sound accusing. I just think that you — that *all* of you — are making a mistake. Please understand that. I don’t want you to hate me. I want you to *listen* to me. I want you to *think* about it. Please. Please realize that — ”

Suddenly, Fred screamed, “You’re *wrooonngg!* You’re evil and you’re *wrooonngg!*”

A sickness moved through Pastor Freeman. Cold dread gripped his insides. “Fred, please, don’t think that I’m — ”

Pastor Freeman froze as Fred reached into his bag and removed a sawed-off shotgun.

“Oh, dear God, Fred, please don’t do what you’re — ”

Fred aimed the shotgun at Denmore, who stared with wide, shocked eyes at the gun, pen in hand, poised over an open book that was ready to be signed.

Pastor Freeman moved quickly as the large man behind Denmore grabbed his female friend and pushed her down on the floor. Pastor Freeman dove toward the table, shoving to the floor the woman who was waiting for her book to be signed, landed atop the table, where he rolled to the other side, letting his Bible flop onto the tabletop.

He put his hands on Denmore’s shoulders and pushed him out of his chair and onto the floor, shouting, “*Get down! Get — ”*

The shotgun fired.

Pastor Freeman made a horrible wet sound as his midsection turned a dark red-black, and he suddenly jerked forward awkwardly. As he flew backward, his body made two — not one, but *two* — distinct, solid *clumps*.

There was a long, deadly silence.

Then the woman who had been standing at the table waiting for her book to be signed screamed a long, shrill scream . . .

“Wait, please *wait!*” Pastor Freeman shouted from the pulpit as most of the congregation began to leave angrily. “Please, *think* about what you’re *doing!* I mean, *really*, think about how you would feel if someone came into this church and tried to silence me because they disagreed with what *I* had to say. . . .”

. . . disagreed with . . .

. . . *and tried to* . . .

. . . what I had to say . . .

. . . silence me . . . silence me . . . silence me . . .

Biography

Ray Garton

Ray Garton is the author of several books, including horror novels such as *LIVE GIRLS* (which has a movie in the works), *CRUCIFAX AUTUMN*, and *THE FOLKS*; thrillers like *TRADE SECRETS* and *SHACKLED*; and numerous short stories and novellas. He's also written a number of movie and television tie-ins for young readers. He lives with his wife, Dawn, in California.

